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**NOT MY KID:  
PARENTS, TEENAGERS, AND  
ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

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PARENTS, TEENAGERS, AND  
ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

For Patrick, Zak, and Jude.

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**NOT MY KID:  
PARENTS, TEENAGERS, AND  
ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

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Over the past two decades, communities across the nation have been mired in battles over sexuality, including gay rights, censorship, and sex education. Based on in-depth interview data with 47 racially and economically diverse parents of teenagers, this study explores how parents make sense of and try to guide their children's sexuality in the midst of these hotly contested and politically charged debates. The findings highlight a paradox in parents' understandings of their children's sexuality: the parents interviewed for this study do not think of their own children as sexual subjects, even as they construct adolescents, in general, as highly sexual and sexualized. The author

explores this paradox throughout the dissertation. She argues that parents' understandings reflect the complex interplay of myriad forces: these include the culture of sexual fear in the U.S.; dominant understandings of adolescence; gender, race, class, and sexual inequalities; and a pervasive American individualist ethos that situates the blame for any negative outcomes of teen sexuality on parents and their children. At the same time, however, these constructions often bolster social inequality. As the author shows, parents' understandings of adolescent sexuality, and their lessons to their children about sexuality, are not only shaped by, but also serve to legitimize, hierarchies and inequalities based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and age. The final chapter discusses the specific social and cultural conditions that might enable parents to think of their children as sexual subjects.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION:

#### SEX ED DEBATES, TEEN SEXUALITY, AND PARENTS

In the summer and fall of 2004, like many states around the nation, Texas was mired in debates over sexuality education<sup>1</sup>. I sat in on the three public Texas State Board of Education meetings about the adoption of new student health textbooks<sup>2</sup>. These meetings were designed to allow Texans the opportunity to publicly address the Board of Education, thereby voicing their opinions about sex education and the new textbooks. In particular, a vociferous battle was being waged in these meetings over the content of student health textbooks. The main focus of the debate was over the inclusion or exclusion of contraceptive information in students' textbooks. This information already appeared in teachers' textbooks –the question was: should students have this information to read and digest on their own?

On one side of the debate were abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed proponents<sup>3</sup> who favored no mention of contraception in student health textbooks and wanted the teacher textbook to stress contraception failure rates. These individuals also wanted any mention of homosexuality to be accompanied by what they called the “negative aspects” of homosexuality, giving, as an example, the higher suicide rates among young gays and lesbians. In addition, abstinence-only proponents wanted marriage defined as between a

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter sex education or sex ed.

<sup>2</sup> In Texas, sex ed is taught in health class.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter abstinence-only.

man and a woman, rather than the more gender-neutral descriptors that appeared in the textbooks under review. For example, they requested that “partner” and “couple” be replaced with “husband and wife” or “spouse.”

On the other side of the debate were comprehensive sex ed proponents – individuals and groups who believe that sex ed should include contraceptive information in both student and teacher textbooks. They also typically said that information on homosexuality and the more gender-neutral terms that were being used to describe intimate relationships should remain.

I attended these debates as both a sociologist and a parent (at the time, my son was 11 and my daughter was 8). As a sociologist, I was interested in what was said, who did the saying, and how it was framed and received by others. In particular, as a gender and sexuality scholar, I was interested in how people talked about adolescent sexuality and how race, class, gender, and sexuality shaped these discourses as well as the overall tone of the meetings, including people’s perceptions of the speakers. For example, I made this observation in my fieldnotes:

One speaker today who addressed the Board was adamant that “abstinence fails.”

He probably gave the most sex positive speech of anyone so far. As he left the podium, the coiffed, strawberry-blonde woman sitting behind me, who had been vocally announcing her approval of many of the abstinence-only speakers by saying “Amen” and “Praise God,” said loudly, “Is he a homosexual or what?”

Homosexuality is apparently so linked to sexual activity by the Religious Right

that simply to have a pro-sex stance means one is gay! Or perhaps she hoped to discredit the speaker by suggesting he is gay.

But as well, reflecting my longstanding interest in the sociology of emotions, I was attuned to the emotional tenor of the meetings. After attending the first debate, I wrote the following:

Today I witnessed a huge emotional controversy over young people's health.

Voices were tight and strained and, in some cases, raised in anger and frustration.

People gave extremely personal testimony. For example, one woman passionately identified herself as "a 31-year-old virgin who is happy to wait until marriage!" to which she received a thundering round of applause.

As a parent with two children in the school system, I was also concerned about, and invested in, the outcome of the debate. My background as a sociologist and a parent converged in my sense that adolescent sexuality was being framed in highly fear-based terms, both in the public meetings and in all the textbooks under review, regardless of their contraceptive content. Through the lens of sociology and parenthood, I also grew increasingly aware of the extent to which "parents" were being bandied about in the meetings. Many of those who spoke before the board, both for the abstinence-only and comprehensive side, introduced themselves and justified their standpoint "as a parent" or, in some cases, "as a grandparent." I frequently heard the phrases "no parent would want" and "any parent can see" being used.

Many of these generalizations did not fit easily with my own sense as a parent. It was not clear to me what parents really thought. Instead, I found that parents were being

used in the fight on either side with broad assumptions being made about their beliefs and practices. For example, most speakers assumed that parents have strong convictions about sexuality and impart these to their children, the only difference being whether their conviction is based on abstinence-only or comprehensive sex ed. After observing these three emotionally charged debates, the sociologist and the parent in me wanted to know: does research support these assumptions about parents?

In an attempt to answer this question, I combed the literature on parents and teenage sexuality. I found two broad literatures. Both suggest that parents play an important role in shaping their teenagers' sexual attitudes and behaviors. One body of research tends to promote parental involvement in shaping adolescent sexuality – these studies find that young people who say their parents have talked to them about sex are more likely to delay the onset of sexual intercourse and to use contraception when they do become sexually active (Baumeister et al. 1995; Dittus and Jaccard 1998; Hutchinson 2002; Resnick et al. 1997). The other body of research on parents and adolescent sexuality is more critical of parental involvement, particularly of how parents may reproduce and reinforce gender inequities in adolescent sexuality (De Gaston et al. 1996; Martin 1996; Moore and Rosenthal 1991; Phillips 2000). For example, this research highlights that parents try to protect their daughters by stressing their sexual vulnerability and emphasizing the dangers of sex, whereas sons are more likely to be given parental leeway to explore their sexuality (Martin 1996).

However, most of the research on parents and adolescent sexuality is with teenagers themselves and rarely delves into parents' understandings of, the meanings that

parents give to, adolescent sexuality. As Frank Furstenberg (2003, 35) observed in a recent review of research on adolescent sexuality:

Sociologists and other social scientific researchers have...given too little thought to how sexuality is treated in the private realm of the family. True, we have countless studies reporting on parental instruction about sex, contraception, and birth control, but few in-depth studies exist on the content of these conversations.

But as well, previous research tends to either condemn or applaud parenting practices and strategies without examining the context in which families are embedded and how this context shapes the understandings and strategies parents adopt. As I will discuss in more detail on the following pages, historically in the US, sexuality has been used as a form of social control. More recently, society's interest in controlling sexuality can be seen in the sex ed debates. Despite declining rates of teenage pregnancy since the 1970s, adolescent sexual activity in the U.S. is frequently framed as a social problem – one that can lead to unintended pregnancy and teen motherhood, disease, heartache, low self-esteem, lower socioeconomic status, and even death (Luker 1996; Nathanson 1991). In the 1970s, fears of an “epidemic” of teenage pregnancies, especially among African Americans, and the belief that teenage motherhood contributed to poverty in America, led to a growing belief that young people should have full access to birth control and should be instructed in their proper uses (Moran 2000). By the end of the 1970s, comprehensive sex education programs<sup>4</sup> were firmly entrenched in many of the nation's schools and

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<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive sex education programs are typically abstinence-based, but stress that not all teenagers will abstain from sexual intercourse and that those that do not abstain should be equipped with information, such as knowledge about different contraceptive

widely viewed as a success, at least based on teenage pregnancy rates. Studies found that although teenagers were more likely to be sexually active, compared to the 1960s, the overall birthrate among teens fell over the course of the 1970s (Moran 2000). Youthful sexual activity was, it would seem, if not endorsed, at least accepted as inevitable by government, sex educators, and other professionals.

A shift occurred in the early 1980s. In 1981, the Reagan administration passed the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), Title XX of the Public Health Service Act (Irvine 2002), also known as the “Chastity Act” (Moran 2000, 204). AFLA denied funds to most programs or projects that provided abortions or abortion counseling. In addition, AFLA mandated abstinence education and, in the sex education programs it did fund, stipulated the inclusion of units promoting “self-discipline and responsibility in human sexuality” (as quoted in Moran 2000, 204). The passage of AFLA represented a concerted “attempt to shift the discourse on the prevention of teenage pregnancy away from contraception and instead to ‘chastity’ or ‘morality’” (Irvine 2002, 90). As such, it had a profound effect on sex education. It shifted the debates away from *whether* sex education should be offered in America’s schools to *which* sex education curriculum will be taught (Irvine 2002; Luker 2006). Conservative groups created new sex education curricula designed “to convey an unambiguous condemnation of sexual activity outside of marriage” (Moran 2000, 213). These came to be broadly known as abstinence-only

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methods, to help make sex safer. And, at least in their heyday, these programs also typically included discussions of sexism, homosexuality, and ethical values. Along with teaching safe sex, these programs sought to encourage fulfilling relationships and promote tolerance and understanding of sexual diversity (Moran 2000).



sex education. By the early 1990s, a growing number of schools had implemented abstinence-only sex ed programs.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law a new entitlement program for abstinence-only education: Section 510(b), Title V of the Social Security Act (Irvine 2002). The provision allocated fifty million dollars annually over five years for sex education programs. A stipulation of the funding was that the sex ed program “teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity” (as quoted in Irvine 2002, 102). This legislation helped support and build a thriving abstinence-only sex education industry (Irvine 2002). With renewed funding under the Bush administration, and expansion under a new federal program established in 2001, Community Based Abstinence Education, abstinence-only sex ed programs have grown in popularity. In 1988, only 2 percent of public school teachers taught abstinence as the only way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In 2003, 30 percent of the nation’s instructors indicated that they taught abstinence only, providing no information about condoms and other contraceptives other than their failure rates (NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll 2004). An increasing number of American youth are now receiving instruction in school on how to “just say no” to sex without learning what to do if they decide to say yes.

Hence, as teenage sexuality has been increasingly framed as a widespread social problem, the solution has largely centered around educating teens and/or controlling them. Families have also been implicated as both part of the problem and, ultimately, the solution to the problem of teenage sexual activity. For example, the “Chastity Act”

passed early in Reagan's administration, identified the problem of teen sexual activity not with young people themselves, but with families, who needed help regaining control over their children (Luker 1996). President Reagan, in a speech stressing parental rights, expressed the prevailing view:

“Isn't it the parents' right to give counsel and advice to keep their children from making mistakes that may affect entire lives?...The rights of parents and the rights of family take precedence over those of Washington-based bureaucrats and social engineers” (as quoted in Nathanson 1991, 168-9).

This way of thinking about teens, sex, and families has largely governed policy decisions and popular imagination for the past 20 plus years. Based on the understanding that sexuality is often used as a form of social control, it is important to ask: Why teenagers? Why families? Why now?

When we start asking these questions, we see that the myopic focus on teens and parents as problem and solution largely ignores the structural inequalities that shape family life and young people's sexuality. As C. Wright Mills (1959) reminds us, biography and history intersect: personal troubles are often rooted in the structure of society. Following Mills, my goal in this dissertation is to grasp what is going on in the world and to understand how these larger social discourses and structures shape parents' understandings and management of their children's sexuality and how this can lead to differential advantages (and disadvantages) for young people. I explore this issue through in-depth interviews with 47 economically and ethnoracially diverse parents of teenagers. In an attempt to contextualize the parents' narratives within larger discourses

of sexuality, adolescence, and sex education, I recruited the parents primarily through their children's health classes in three high schools and one middle school. I also conducted participant observation in several high school sex ed classes and presentations and at numerous Parent Teacher Association meetings.

Whereas much research on parents and adolescent sexuality attempts to gauge the effectiveness of parent-child sex talks, in this dissertation, I examine parents' constructions of adolescent sexuality and parent-child sex talks *sociologically*, as shaped by myriad social forces. As I will show, the parents I interviewed do not think of their own children as sexual beings, even as they construct adolescents, in general, as highly sexual and sexualized. By this I mean that, while parents do not view their own children as sexually desiring subjects, they construct their children's peers as sexually agentic and even voracious. Some readers might think this paradox is absurd and that the parents I interviewed are crazy. Indeed, in the course of giving talks on my research, audience members sometimes laughed at the parents' quotes as I read them out, suggesting they saw the parents' understandings of their children as silly or delusional. But, as I hope I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, there are a number of very real reasons why parents think as they do. Parents are grappling with numerous discursive contradictions and structural conditions in trying to make sense of and guide their children's sexuality. As I will argue, parents' construction of their own children as asexual represents a way to cope with various anxieties about sexuality, parenting, and their teenagers' (and, indeed, their own) present and future life opportunities. At the same time, however, these constructions often reflect and bolster social inequality. As we will see, parents'

understandings of adolescent sexuality are shaped by, and often reproduce, race, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies and inequalities.

In the sections that follow, I delve into the recent history of sex education and the debates over it, and, in doing so, describe my theoretical approach. Lastly, I expand on the study's methodology and provide an overview of the dissertation.

### Literature Review

The debates in Texas over sex education that I observed were not isolated events. Similar debates have occurred in communities across the nation in recent years (Fields forthcoming; Irvine 2002; Luker 2006). Why is sex education such a hot-button topic and what do the debates over it tell us about the social construction of adolescence and sexuality and about families and social inequality?

On the following pages, I will review recent research on sex education and adolescent sexuality. Several recent studies have explored the issue of sex education in the U.S. through the activists on either side of the sex ed debates (Luker 2006), the rhetorical strategies employed by the Christian Right in battles over sex ed (Irvine 2002), the sex ed classroom (Fields forthcoming), and through a cultural lens, by comparing the sexual attitudes of parents and teenagers in the U.S. and the Netherlands (Schalet 2000, 2004). These works establish several important themes relevant to my project. First, they highlight American cultural logic about children and childhood sexuality. Second, they raise important questions about the nature and purpose of sex education itself in U.S. society. Third, they delineate the relationship between sexuality and social inequality. In what follows, I expand on each of these points.

## Sex Education and the Construction of Adolescent Sexuality

Although, based on national polls, most Americans support sex education (Gallup 1998; NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2004) and despite greater openness about sexuality in popular culture since the 1960s, debates over whether and how young people should learn about sexuality have continued. Some argue the debates have increased in intensity over the past four decades (Irvine 2002; Levine 2002) – a period marked by “sex panics,” explosive political and local clashes over sexuality, including gay rights, censorship, and sex education (Irvine 2007; Vance 1984, 434). The debates over sex education, as explored in several recent studies (Fields forthcoming; Irvine 2002; Luker 2006), offer a window into attitudes about and public contestations over adolescence and sexuality.

Through interviews with activists, participant observation at several community sex ed debates, and through court records, media coverage, and other primary documents, Janice Irvine (2002) provides a comprehensive and engaging portrait of the national battle over sex education from the 1960s to 2000. Irvine primarily focuses on the highly effective strategies of what she calls the New Right, an alliance formed in the late sixties of diverse conservative elements to undermine comprehensive sex education. According to Irvine, along with their impressive political organization, the New Right would not have been so successful in galvanizing Americans to oppose comprehensive sex education programs if not for the dominant culture of sexual fear and shame in the U.S. and the century-old ideology of childhood as a time of innocence and vulnerability. She writes, “Our modern image of a naturally asexual, pure childhood” lies “at the heart of

century-long conflicts over sex education” (Irvine 2002, 13). From where did these ideas about sexuality and adolescence originate?

Sexuality is commonly thought of as a purely biological, innate drive (Chapkis 1997; Stein 1989). Although there may be biological factors to people’s sexual expressions, as the cultural historian Michel Foucault (1978) reminds us, sexuality is an historically contingent practice closely connected to power relations, values, and culture. The dominant understanding of sexuality in U.S. culture has historically been a negative one of danger and immorality, particularly for the young, unmarried, and those marked as “other” (Irvine 2002; Stein 2006). Sexual shame, with its roots in Christianity, is widespread in the U.S. (Stein 2006). Yet, some historical evidence suggests that childhood sexuality was more commonly accepted and embraced in the past than it is today (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Foucault 1978). For example, whereas many imagine the colonial period as a time in U.S. history when sexuality was highly regulated, with a gradual evolution toward more and more sexual freedoms over time, historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman (1988) argue that sexual activity among the young and unmarried during colonial times was common and generally accepted, as long as it was covert and led to marriage. Based on marriage certificates and birth records, D’Emilio and Freedman found that in many cases children were born only a few months after a wedding, indicating that premarital sexual activity was relatively commonplace among the Puritans.

As the U.S. grew ever more urbanized in the late 1800s, young people were gradually removed from economic life and conceptualized in terms of innocence and

vulnerability (Luker 1996). Statutes, such as age of consent laws and laws governing the right to marry and work, were modified to reflect these changing understandings of childhood. For example, age of consent laws, which set the age at which a person is deemed able to consent to sex, rose from seven during colonial times to ten, twelve, and, over time, as high as fourteen, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the late 1800s, the average age of consent in the U.S. was fourteen (Luker 1996). However, across the nation, age of consent laws were raised slowly, unevenly, and with great reluctance (Luker 1996). Legislators' opposition to raising the age of consent reveals important understandings of childhood and child sexuality. Many were opposed because they feared that girls would use these statutes to blackmail their older male lovers, revealing a perception of preadolescent girls as "not only competent enough to decide to have sexual intercourse, but also sufficiently clever to use that competence to compromise men" (Luker 1996, 28). In contrast, throughout the twentieth century there has been a gradual pathologization and effacement of childhood sexuality (Angelides 2004; Irvine 2002; Levine 2002).

The first calls for sex education emerged in tandem with the notion that sex is dangerous for the young and the unmarried and the newly discovered developmental stage in the life course – adolescence, a term coined in 1904 (Levine 2002; Luker 1996). School-based sex education was historically predicated on the belief that knowledge about the dangers of sex would prevent youthful sexual activity and that parents, especially mothers, were ill-equipped to impart this information to their children (Moran

2000). From the beginning, however, sex education reflected adults' deep anxieties about childhood, sexuality, gender, marriage, and the institution of the family.

According to Kristin Luker (2006), the current struggle over sex education is fueled by these very same anxieties. Luker arrives at this argument by chronicling the clashes over sex education in four communities in different regions of the U.S. In each community, Luker attended school board meetings where sex education was being debated and interviewed activists involved in the fight over what kind of sex education should be taught. Her central thesis is that the battles over sex education in the U.S. really represent debates about sex, marriage, and, by extension, gender, and that the origins of these debates lie in the gender and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Through her interviews with activists, Luker (2006) finds that those she terms sexual liberals view the sixties and seventies positively, as a time when women's sexual autonomy and choices expanded. Sexual conservatives, by contrast, see it as a time when women became more vulnerable precisely because sex came to be viewed in terms of personal choice and, hence, was detached from marriage. According to Luker, they are both right. Some women, because of their social background or education, were able to use the legal right to an abortion and access to effective contraception to delay or forego marriage and motherhood in pursuit of higher education and professional careers. These women tend to be sexual liberals. But, as Luker (82) wryly observes, "revolutions have winners and losers." Among women less economically fortunate or ambitious, out-of-wedlock birthrates tripled. As contraception was increasingly seen as a woman's



responsibility, motherhood became her choice. It is this trend that concerns sexual conservatives.

Through her study, Luker demarcates and contextualizes the differences and, sometimes, similarities between sexual liberals and sexual conservatives. Ultimately, Luker argues that liberals and conservatives disagree on a fundamental level about values and the role of information in people's lives. Despite their differences, however, both sexual liberals and conservatives agree on a fundamental level about the need to protect children (Fields forthcoming; Irvine 2002; Levine 2002). According to journalist Judith Levine (2002, xxi), the last few decades have ushered in an unprecedented era of "child protectionism" in Western society. A great deal of the concern about children and childhood well-being is tied to sexuality. What Jessica Fields (forthcoming) terms the "the seductive rhetoric of childhood sexual innocence" appeals to both sexual liberals and conservatives because it meshes with a sense of urgency in the need to protect children from sexual harm. Yet, as we have seen, this understanding of children as innocent and in need of protection is a relatively recent one. But as well, it is not equally applied to all children; instead it is a construct laced through with gender, race, class, and sexual inequalities.

### Sexuality and Social Inequality

From the beginning, sex education was not always or even primarily about sex; rather it was about what sex represented: the potential to upset the social order (Moran 2000) – a social order largely maintained through structures of domination. D'Emilio and Freedman (1988, 52) note in their comprehensive examination of the history of

sexuality in the United States that “the use of sex as a form of domination – by race especially, but increasingly by gender, and class – took shape in the seventeenth century and continued throughout American history.” In 1910, for example, the white slavery scare – the specter of young white women being sold into sexual slavery by swarthy men – prompted a massive crackdown on prostitution. At the same time, sterilization laws were passed in many states to prevent “undesirables” from reproducing (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, 215) and birth control advocates, including Margaret Sanger, pitched birth control largely on the grounds that it would reduce the number of those deemed “unfit” – namely, the poor, immigrants, and people of color (D’Emilio and Freedman, 245). Largely due to fears of Black population growth after the Depression, southern states were at the vanguard of state-supported birth control (D’Emilio and Freedman). Revealing the continued linkage between race, gender, and sexuality, in their fight against school integration in the 1950s, Southern racists distributed pictures of White women embracing Black men, playing on racist fears of hypersexual Black men corrupting White women’s purity and innocence (Palladino 1996).

In addition, assumptions about gender and fears of changes to the gender order formed a major underpinning of early sex education and reveal how the social construction of gender is intertwined with the social construction of sexuality. In their classic article on the social construction of gender, West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that, rather than constituting a fixed identity, gender is an emergent feature of social situations that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Cultural norms and beliefs about gender guide individuals’ understandings and performances of gender (West and

Zimmerman 1987). These definitions and understandings are closely linked to ideas about sexuality. Indeed, scholars such as Pepper Schwartz and Virginia Rutter (1998) argue that gender is the most significant dimension of sexuality.

In support of this assertion, the most prevalent theme of early efforts at sex education was the attempt to control promiscuous male sexuality. In order to eradicate prostitution, illegitimacy, and the spread of venereal disease, sex ed advocates argued that men must be taught to resist their base instincts (Moran 2000). According to Moran (2000, 28), however, disease and prostitution were “metaphors for social decline.” For example, the image of “innocent wives and children” infected by diseased immigrant women through their male clients was habitually used to justify the need for comprehensive sex education (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, 209). In reality, the goal was, in large part, to shore up the middle-class moral order and preserve the sanctity of marriage and family (Moran). Many sex ed advocates believed that changes in the middle- and upper-class family – marital delay, fewer children per household, and increased marital instability – were threatening their very survival and the survival of society as they knew it. Echoing Theodore Roosevelt’s warning that Whites were in danger of committing “race suicide,” some sex ed proponents suggested that an evolutionary crisis was upon them (Moran). The remedy they proposed was not safe sex; it was no sex outside of marriage. Male continence was encouraged for the sake of social stability and, implicitly, the preservation of the superior White race (Moran). The focus was on male sexuality since women, at least respectable, middle-class women, were not yet viewed as sexual subjects.

Although early proponents of sex education were loathe to acknowledge women as sexual beings, by the 1940s, public officials and sex educators were more willing to acknowledge female sexuality, at least when restricted to marriage. Unmarried, young women with “too much sexual interest,” by contrast, were increasingly represented as pathological (Nathanson 1991). In a U.S. Children’s Bureau report from 1946 titled *Guiding the Adolescent*, parents were advised “to treat sexual over-indulgence, like over-eating, as a ‘health’ problem, although the consequences of which they warned were social rather than medical;” namely, loss of reputation (Nathanson 1991, 101). The “cure” for female promiscuity advocated by the Children’s Bureau was early marriage. Thus, female sexual desire was deemed useful when restricted to marriage: sexually responsive wives could keep sex firmly in the private sphere of the home, thereby eliminating sexual vice. By the 1950s, married sexual relations had become a new wifely duty as wives “were urged to be sexual playmates to their husbands” (Melody and Peterson 1999, 135). Hence, despite changing ideologies of female sexuality, as in the early 1900s, sexual relations continued to be synonymous with marital relations.

As the previous examples underscore, there was an apparent absence of any discussion of homosexuality in sex education until the 1970s. Men had sex with women – the goal of sex educators was to ensure that any given man only had sex with one woman, to whom he was married, thus upholding Victorian morality and preserving social order. As Stephen Valocchi (2005, 756) observes, the dominance of heterosexuality is maintained in part

by preventing homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be taken for granted or go unmarked or seem right in the way heterosexuality can. As a result, the dominance of heterosexuality often operates unconsciously or in ways that make it particularly difficult to identify.

The lack of any formal discussion around sexual orientation in sex ed served to shore up heterosexuality by privileging it as the normal and natural form of sexual expression (Katz 1995). With homosexuality unspoken and covert, it was easy to justify its stigmatization. Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association continued to classify homosexuality as a mental illness in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1973 (Katz). However, as we can see in the more recent debates over sex ed, where the question is *how* to teach about homosexuality (e.g., to emphasize its so-called negative aspects or to present it as one way among others to express sexual desire), discussions of homosexuality can just as easily further stigmatize, rather than diffuse stigma. As Irvine (2002, 195) observes in chronicling the proliferation of sexual speech by the Christian Right in the 1980s and 1990s, “More sexual speech does not inevitably bring more sexual freedom.” Sex is regulated not by silence but by endless attention to and speech about it – by the “deployment of sexuality” (Foucault 1978, 107).

In the early calls for, and the gradual adoption of, sex education, hence, we see clear evidence of how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect in the construction of and concerns about young people’s sexual behavior. According to Jessica Fields (forthcoming), this tradition continues today. In particular, the recent debates over sex education, Fields argues, are fueled by and infused with racialized and gendered thinking

about sexuality and adolescence. By attending school board meetings and interviewing administrators, teachers, and community advocates, Fields examines the debates over sex education and the contested adoption of abstinence-only curricula in North Carolina in the mid and late 1990s. In addition, Fields observed in three sex ed classrooms to explore how sex ed teachers “carried out, resisted, and revised directives from administrators and politicians” (Fields forthcoming, 31-32).

Drawing on research such as Ann Arnett Ferguson’s (2000) school ethnography, Fields (forthcoming, 61) argues that the seemingly universal understandings of childhood sexual innocence espoused in the struggles over sex ed in North Carolina “served racialized and gendered ends.” In her ethnography of an elementary school, Ferguson (2000) observes that, far from viewing African American boys as innocents, teachers and other school personnel adultified Black male students, identifying them as “unsalvageable” and framing their behaviors as willfully bad. By contrast, White male students’ behaviors were more often framed as “boys being boys” and their acting up either ignored or minimized. Similarly, Fields (64) finds that abstinence-only proponents in North Carolina used childhood innocence as an argument for abstinence-only instruction “in order to contain the corrupting influence of sexually unsalvageable adolescents.” Comprehensive sex ed proponents, on the other hand, used “the rhetoric of a diverse population of vulnerable youth...to speak publicly of their private concerns for African American girls without claiming those concerns” (Fields, 67). As Fields notes, reflecting a colorblind trend in U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Collins 2004), rather than speaking directly about race, class, and gender, both sides of the debate adopted

what Fields (forthcoming, 68) terms “racialized ideological codes” such as “at-risk,” a racialized signifier of economic disadvantage (Ferguson 2000), and “children having children,” a seemingly race and class neutral discourse that elides the correlation between teen pregnancy and class and race.

Fields’ (forthcoming) study reveals the extent to which these racialized ideological codes are gendered and sexualized. Similarly, Wendy Luttrell (2003, 4) in her study of a high school group of teenage mothers observes that the dominant image that gets evoked of the pregnant teenager is “a black, urban, poor female who is more than likely herself the daughter of a teenage mother.” These teenagers are typically blamed for becoming single mothers and the future poverty this entails (Kaplan 1996). In her ethnography of an ethnically diverse high school, Julie Bettie (2003) points out that although the working-class Mexican American girls at the high school were not more sexually active than other female students, they were more likely to keep their babies if they became pregnant. The visibility of babies and pregnant bodies among working-class Mexican American girls led students and some school personnel to assume differences of sexual morals between racial/ethnic and class groups. Bettie (2003, 46) writes: “The cause of teenage pregnancy is imagined not as a consequence of being poor but as a perceived consequence of poor family values among people of color.” These studies, along with Fields’, highlight the intersections of race/ethnicity, class, and gender in constructions of adolescent sexuality.

In addition to analyzing the school board debates over sex ed in North Carolina, Fields offers an engaging look into the sex ed classroom through two public schools and

one private school in North Carolina. Despite the contentious battles over abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex ed, she finds little difference existed between the two public schools, even though one was in a district that had adopted an abstinence-only curriculum and the other was located in a comprehensive sex ed district. Both had been markedly shaped by the debates over sex education, so that the teachers in both schools were reluctant to discuss topics deemed controversial, including homosexuality and bisexuality, sexism, and sexual pleasure and tended to reproduce social inequalities based on age, race, gender, and sexuality. In contrast, although Fields is also critical of some of the sexual lessons taught at the private school, the predominantly affluent, White students at this school “were more likely to hear that sexuality offered them a site of personal fulfillment and expression” (Fields forthcoming, 201). Hence, sex education may be based upon *and* can serve to perpetuate and legitimate sexual hierarchies and inequalities of race, class, and gender.

In sum, Irvine’s, Luker’s, and Fields’ research nicely contextualize and capture the beliefs of those who dominate the public discourse on sex education and adolescent sexuality. They show how these debates are fueled by the notion of childhood innocence and asexuality and how this seemingly generic notion belies the racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist foundations of sex education and the construction of the innocent child. They also underscore the extent to which sexual hierarchies are naturalized and legitimized by social inequality and the governing emotions of sexuality, “sexual shame, stigma, fear, disgust” (Irvine 2007, 3). Yet, in focusing on the debates over sex education, all three studies do little to elucidate the views of what Luker calls “the sexual



middle,” the majority of Americans who are not politically active in the fights over sex education and who are, no doubt, ambivalent about the issue. In particular, these studies do not address the understandings and strategies of nonactivist parents. Irvine (2002, 8), for example, focuses on how the sex education debates “organize ambivalence, confusion, and anxieties [about sexuality] into tidy sound bites designed for mass mobilization,” acknowledging that, in doing so, she ignores “how average parents negotiate a path through this highly fraught terrain.”

#### Parents and Adolescent Sexuality

The newfound idea of childhood innocence and vulnerability that took hold in the late 1800s and early 1900s not only transformed ideas about childhood and sexuality, it radically reframed the parent-child relationship (Palladino 1996). Good parents were increasingly defined as those who protected their children from adult responsibilities and worries, including sexual activity (Zelizer 1985). Within this ideology of parenting, children’s innocence reflected adults’, especially parents’, ability to shelter them (Warner 1994). This new cult of parenting, however, ignored the social conditions in which families lived and established a middle class standard that was largely unattainable for the majority of Americans (Palladino 1996). It also erased young people’s sexual agency (Fields forthcoming).

The past few decades have witnessed an expansion of the sexual dangers from which parents must protect their children. For example, despite its long history, child physical and sexual abuse only came to be defined as a widespread social problem in the late seventies when an uneasy alliance of feminists, professionals, such as physicians and

social workers, and social conservatives joined “in nationwide campaigns to protect children against a variety of abuses and abusers” (Angelides 2004; Irvine 2002, 135). As Irvine (2002) notes, from inflated child sexual abuse prevalence figures to expanded definitions of child victimization to include such things as talking to a child about sexuality, these efforts contributed to a cultural climate in which child abuse seemed omnipresent. According to Steven Angelides (2004), they also, at best, trivialized and, at worst, effaced child sexuality, since, in order to be blameless victims of child sexual abuse, children had to be constructed as sexually ignorant, innocent, and powerless. How do American parents navigate through this veritable minefield of childhood innocence and sexual danger?

In one of the rare studies on adolescent sexuality that includes both adolescents and their parents, Amy Schalet (2000, 2004) conducted interviews in both the U.S. and the Netherlands in order to explore cultural differences between American and Dutch parents’ and teenagers’ attitudes about sexuality. She finds striking differences in conceptions of adolescent sexuality between White, middle-class parents in the U.S. and the Netherlands, suggesting that these views are, in large part, culturally constructed. Dutch parents “normalize” while American parents “dramatize” the sexuality of teenagers. The dangerous consequences of sex loom particularly large for American parents, Schalet observes, because they view their teenagers as vessels of raging hormones without the capacities of self-regulation. Hence, American parents enforce rules because they believe that, in the absence of external restraints, teens will engage in sexual intercourse, with potentially devastating consequences.

Importantly, as Schalet notes, it is not simply that Americans and the Dutch have radically opposing ideas about sexuality, but also that their beliefs are supported by societal conditions. Adolescent sexual activity *is* a more risky enterprise in the U.S. than it is in the Netherlands. Despite similar rates of sexual activity among Dutch youth, the teen pregnancy rate in the Netherlands is the lowest in the world. In the U.S., by contrast, the teen pregnancy rate is higher than in similarly developed, industrialized nations. In any given year, one in five sexually active American girls become pregnant (Guttmacher Institute 1999). A danger discourse also prevails in most sex education programs in the U.S. These programs focus on the short- and long-term effects of STDs, the regrets and lost opportunities of teenage pregnancy, the heartache and pain that loss of one's reputation brings, and the risk of loss of health and life through HIV/AIDS infection (Fields forthcoming; Kirby 1997; Morris 1997; Trudell 1992).

A strength of Schalet's work, then, is that she connects her findings to larger socioeconomic and political forces. She asserts that the differences between American and Dutch constructions of adolescent sexuality can be explained, in large part, by differing policies and politics of reproduction in the two countries. In the U.S., reproductive technologies, such as contraception and abortion, are often difficult to obtain due to cost and availability. In addition, Schalet points out, in part because of the debates and furor over them, reproductive information and services may be conceptually inaccessible. In the Netherlands, by contrast, where there is universal health coverage, birth control use among teenage girls is widespread, the morning-after-pill is widely available, and abortion can be obtained at no cost.

To facilitate a cross-national comparison, however, Schalet included only middle-class Whites in her sample, arguing that these individuals represent the “mainstream” in each country. Thus, while she elucidates striking differences between the U.S. and the Netherlands, she is not able to capture how experiences and interpretations may be shaped by a person’s location among competing discourses of gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, and so on (Baca Zinn and Dill 1996; Collins 2000; Ferguson 2000). In other words, Schalet offers a portrait of middle-class White Americans, but the U.S. is a highly racially and economically stratified society. Do her findings apply to other social groups in the U.S.? This is an issue that I examine by including a more diverse sample of American parents of teenagers.

As we have seen, recent policy decisions have scaled back sex education in public schools and have given parents greater governance of their children’s sexuality. At the same time that abstinence-only sex ed has become increasingly prevalent in the nation’s classrooms, polls consistently show that a large majority of the public, including parents, think sex ed should include information beyond sexual abstinence (Gallup 1998; NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2004). In addition to topics that are routinely covered in sex education classes—such as the basics of reproduction, HIV and STDs, and abstinence—parents want schools to cover topics often perceived to be controversial by school administrators and teachers (NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2004). For example, at least three-quarters of parents say that sex ed should cover how to use condoms and other forms of birth control, abortion, sexual orientation, pressures to have sex, and the emotional consequences of having sex. Yet, most of these topics tend to be the very ones

that teachers shy away from or are prohibited from teaching (Fields forthcoming; NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy 2004).

In this study, I ask: How do parents of teenagers make sense of and talk to their teenagers about sexuality at a time when sexuality *and* adolescence represent contested and contradictory terrains and sites of social control and inequality? Through in-depth interviews with 47 parents of teenagers, I examine the narratives and strategies of a diverse group of parents of teenagers to better understand how parents make sense of adolescent sexuality, how these understandings are linked to dominant discourses and social inequalities, and how they shape parents' strategies of control over adolescent sexuality. My goal is to provide insight into how parents navigate numerous contradictory and competing discourses about sexuality and also to contextualize parents' understandings and management of adolescent sexuality within larger social structures. This research, hence, will shed light on how people grapple with contradictions, inconsistencies, and inequalities in their lives and the implications for the construction of adolescent sexuality, family sex talks, and the reproduction of social inequality.

### Study Methods

In order to learn more about how parents of teenagers understand and attempt to manage adolescent sexuality, I conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse group of parents of teenagers, comprising six fathers, one grandmother, and 40 mothers. Most interviews were conducted with individual parents (n=41). However, I interviewed three heterosexual couples together (n=6). Hence, of the six fathers who participated, three were interviewed as part of a couple. During these couple interviews, I made a conscious

effort to hear from both parents. However, in two of the couple interviews, the father dominated the discussion.

Because this is an interpretive study, with the goal of understanding the meanings parents give to adolescent sexuality, I chose in-depth interviewing, with its emphasis on meanings, dynamics, and processes, as my primary method (Esterberg 2002; Weiss 1994). Interviews lasted from one to two and a half hours and were generally conducted in study participants' homes, but occasionally I interviewed parents at their workplace or a café. The interviews focused on the parent's beliefs and experiences and "processes of interpretation that give meaning to everyday lives" (DeVault 1991, 11). Each interview explored a broad array of topics related to parenting teenagers, focusing specifically on puberty, dating, and sexuality. In order to understand how parents make sense of, and help to navigate their children through, adolescent sexuality, I asked a series of open-ended questions, starting with "How would you describe you [son/daughter]?" and "Describe a typical day." Although my interview guide contained a number of very specific questions (see Appendix), as I completed more interviews and became more comfortable and familiar with the interview process, I grew better at asking questions that elicited stories (Plummer 2001). For example, when parents affirmed that they had talked to their children about sexuality, I would probe, "Tell me about your experiences talking to your kids about sex," or, more informally, "Tell me how that went," to try to capture the details and flavor of these interactions. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In transcribing them, I attempted to be as true to the recording as possible, transcribing every "um" and "you know," false start, stutter, pause, laugh, and sob, so

that later, when I read through each transcript, I could, in some ways, recapture the affective cadence of the interview. As I discuss below, two of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Since I do not speak Spanish, these interviews were professionally transcribed without the same attention to their emotive tenor. I use pseudonyms for the parents to maintain confidentiality.

### Recruitment

As stated earlier, in order to nestle parents' responses within institutional discourses of adolescent sexuality, most of the parents in this study were recruited through their children's health classes in three high schools and one middle school (n=40). The remaining seven parents were recruited through advertisements I placed in community newspapers in the schools' neighborhoods (n=3) and through referrals (n=4).

The four schools from which I recruited parents are located in Austin, a large southwest city, which, like many other American cities, has a history of racial segregation. The demographic profiles of the schools reveal the continued legacy of segregation. I have changed the names of the schools to protect the identities of the parents and their children and the teachers who let me recruit through their classrooms. Taylor High School and Eastside High School are both located in low-income, predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. This is reflected in the student body: at Taylor, over three-quarters of the students are Black or Latino/a; 88 percent of the students at Eastside are Black or Latino/a. Reflecting the legacy and persistence of racial discrimination (Conley 1999; Shapiro 2004), at both schools well over half the student body is classified as economically disadvantaged. Hayden Middle School and Medlin

High School, by contrast, are located in high-income, predominantly White neighborhoods. Several of the parents with children at Hayden MS also have older children who attended or are currently attending adjacent Lake HS. Although the ethnoracial and economic demographic profile of these schools is not as extreme as at Taylor and Eastside, Whites comprise the majority at both schools: at Hayden MS, 54 percent of the student body is White (56 percent at nearby Lake HS), while at Medlin, 51 percent of the students are White. Less than one-quarter of the students at these schools are classified as economically disadvantaged.

The fact that I recruited from these four schools largely reflects practical concerns: namely, the health teachers at each of these schools agreed to participate in my study. I initially made contact with the health teacher at Hayden Middle School, Ms. B, through my daughter's elementary school teacher. She, in turn, put me in touch with the teacher at Taylor High School, Ms. F. Later, as I realized how challenging it was to recruit parents and hoping to avoid overtaxing these two teachers, I contacted the coordinator of all the health teachers in the school district (whose name had been given to me by Ms. B). The health teacher coordinator did not directly facilitate contact with other health teachers, but she did give me a list of five health teachers whom she thought would be interested in my study and told me that I could use her name as a reference when I contacted these teachers. I sent these five teachers a letter of introduction and then followed up a few days later with a phone call. As anyone who works with teachers or who has a child in the school system knows, it can be difficult to get teachers on the phone, and, in all five cases, I left a message. I followed up with another phone call a



few days later and was fortunate enough to get one teacher on the line, Ms. S, the health teacher at Eastside High School. She agreed to allow me to recruit parents from her classroom (after I agreed to buy an electronic three-hole punch for her class; no flies on Ms. S). After numerous other phone calls and messages, I eventually received a response from the health teacher at Medlin High School, permitting me to recruit from her health classes. I am extremely grateful for these four teachers' generosity of time and spirit. Ms. B's and Ms. F's early enthusiasm about the project, including convincing the principals of their schools to participate, helped me receive permission from the Austin Independent School District's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which in turn facilitated approval from the University of Texas at Austin's IRB.

The study's recruitment strategy developed as the project evolved. In the first recruitment wave in the spring of 2006, Ms. F, the Health teacher at Taylor High School, agreed to distribute 220 letters describing the study to her students with the request that they take these letters home and give them to their parents. Accompanying the letter was a parent participation form and a self-addressed, stamped envelope (see Appendix). The rationale behind this recruiting strategy was that parents could anonymously mail the form to me, stating their interest in participating in the project. However, out of the 220 letters sent out, I received only four responses. Moreover, these four individuals were not representative of the school population. Despite recruiting from a school with a predominantly Black and Latino and low-income student body, three of the parents identified as White and one identified as multiracial, although in doing so she described herself as "Heinz 57," a de facto White ethnic identification (Frankenberg 1992). In

addition, only one of the study participants identified as working class. As a whole, these parents, hence, represent a unique group: White, mostly middle-class parents whose children attend a predominantly minority, low-income school.

White middle-class individuals are often overrepresented in qualitative studies (Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung 1988). They may be more willing than other economic and ethnoracial groups to volunteer to participate in a study because they do not have negative historical associations with research projects (Collins 2000; Baca Zinn 1979) and may have greater flexibility and control over their schedules. To address this issue, I made various efforts in subsequent recruitment waves to obtain a better response rate, hoping that, in the process, I would obtain a more diverse sample. For example, the health teacher at Medlin High School allowed me to personally distribute the letters to her students. In doing so, I tried to generate interest in the project and address any concerns students might have had about their parent participating.

I quickly realized, however, that I would need to distribute large volumes of letters and my tight budget made it difficult to include a stamped envelope for each letter. I thus asked the health teachers if parents could have the option of returning the participation form to their children's classroom (in a sealed envelope for anonymity), in addition to contacting me via phone or email. Despite creating more work for them, all of the health teachers kindly agreed to this. In the case of Hayden Middle School, the letter and participation form were sent out with other mandatory parental consent forms requiring signatures; this significantly improved the response rate. In one instance, unbeknownst to me, Ms. S, the Health teacher at Eastside High School, promised her

students extra credit if their parent participated. Giving students an incentive to deliver the letter to their parent increased the response rate exponentially. However, once I learned of Ms. S's promise of extra credit, I expressed concern, explaining that I could not provide her with a list of those parents who participated because I had guaranteed all parents confidentiality. Ultimately, Ms. S decided to give all the students in her class extra credit, providing a tenable solution to what could have been a very difficult ethical situation. I also recruited more Black and Latino/a parents from Eastside than from Taylor, despite both schools having a similar demographic makeup. In addition to the offer of extra credit, Ms. S is Black, whereas the other three Health teachers who participated are White (as am I). I suspect her Black and Latino students may have been more willing to play a part because she endorsed the project (Baca Zinn 1979; Kaplan 1996).

During the summer of 2006, largely out of concerns about the difficulties I was encountering recruiting parents through the schools, I also placed several advertisements in community newspapers near the schools in an effort to recruit more parents. However, this recruitment effort was costly and led to only three interviews, and, in the fall of 2006, I continued to recruit from the schools. In the end, I sent out close to four hundred letters to parents of students at the four schools and received fifty-three responses. From this pool, I interviewed forty parents.

In addition to the practical hurdles I encountered during the course of the project, I have also tried to remain reflexive about my role as a researcher throughout (Collins 1986; Davies 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 2002; Merton 1972). To be sure, my own

identity and life experiences, among other factors, shaped what I asked and how I heard and interpreted the response. My identity, along with the location, date, and time of the interview, the specific experiences I and my interviewee had that day, and so on, also undoubtedly shaped the texture of each interview. As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2002, 116) emphasize, the interview setting is “a dynamic, meaning-making occasion.” An interview is more than just an occasion for relaying information; it is a social encounter in its own right. In particular, as a heterosexual, White, middle-class woman in my mid-30s with two children of my own, I realize that some of the parents I interviewed may have edited their stories and thoughts based on their perceptions of who I am and what I might be willing to hear and learn. Mary Waters (1999, 359), for example, in her research with West Indian immigrants and their black and white coworkers, found that the interviews with African Americans that were conducted by an African-American male student “elicited more antiwhite sentiments and experiences with discrimination” than did her own interviews with African Americans. Waters, I should note, is White.

Although, parents, like any other social category, are a heterogeneous group, being a parent myself made me somewhat of an insider (Collins 1986; Kaplan 1996; Merton 1972). As a researcher studying something familiar, I had to learn and remind myself regularly to “make the familiar strange,” to question the taken-for-granted understandings that parents often articulated in their interviews. My status as a parent also had the potential, I feared, to raise concerns among the parents I interviewed about being judged. In my own experience as a parent and by talking with many parents about this issue, I have found that parents are often sensitive about and highly attuned to the

judgmental attitudes of other parents. I worried, therefore, that if parents knew that I was a parent, they would edit their stories based on their ideas about my own parenting beliefs and practices. I was also concerned that parents would assume that I knew all about parenting and would, hence, not be as descriptive in their interviews. I thus decided not to identify as a parent unless directly asked (which rarely happened). Instead, I presented myself as a graduate student interested in the challenges parents face in raising teenagers. In general, I think this approach worked. In part because I looked young, some parents effectively took me under their wing during their interview, as though they genuinely wanted to introduce me to the myriad intricacies of raising children and parenting teenagers. Many expressed anger about other parents' behavior. A few parents explicitly said, "The problem with teens today is that parents don't want to parent." Others showed a great deal of vulnerability and confusion about parenting during their interview, something they may not have been as willing to do had they known I was a parent. However, it may be that, by not identifying as a parent, I missed an opportunity to develop greater rapport with my study participants.

In sum, "all knowledge is created within human interaction" (Esterberg 2002, 12). As with any study, the research I report here is shaped by who I am, how I think, what I asked, and the access I gained to the field. Acknowledging this fact of social research helped me to remain aware throughout this study of my own blind spots, values, and preoccupations. I asked myself regularly: Why are parents doing and thinking what they do and think from their point of view? And: How is my understanding of this being filtered through a lens based on my own life experiences and academic training? By

doing so, I think I was able to gain a better understanding of the complex process by which parents make sense of their teenagers' sexuality.

### Sample

Table 1 provides basic demographic information about the 47 parents of teenagers interviewed for this study. Just over half of the parents identify as White (n=24), about one-third identify as Latino/a (n=16), one-eighth identify as Black (n=6), and one identifies as multiracial. In line with recent work stressing the social construction of race and ethnicity (Bettie 2003; Bonnett 1996; Winant 2000), these categories should not be considered monolithic or representative of all people who identify as a particular race/ethnicity. For example, even in my small sample, the category Latino/a contains a great deal of diversity. Most parents whom I classify as Latino/a listed their background as Mexican or Mexican American, but one identified as Cuban, another as Guatemalan, and one listed her background as "fourteenth generation descendent of Spanish settlers in New Mexico." In addition, five Latino/a parents immigrated to the U.S. as adults (three of these five are undocumented). Two of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Since I do not speak Spanish, I asked a fellow graduate student from Mexico to act as an interpreter. During these interviews, I would ask a question in English, he would translate it to Spanish and ask the parent, who would reply in Spanish. He then paraphrased the response, allowing me to pose follow up questions. This graduate student also helped me to translate the consent form into Spanish.

Table 1. Study Participants

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Social Class</u>	<u>Children</u>		<u>School</u>
				<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	
Sandra	45	White	Upper middle	0	2	Taylor HS
Kelly	37	White	Working class	0	2	Taylor HS
Pamela	47	White	Lower middle	1	0	Taylor HS
Gail	58	Multiracial	Lower middle	2	1	Taylor HS
Beatrice	52	White	Lower middle	1	0	Taylor HS
Teresa	43	Latina	Working class	2	3	Taylor HS
Lorena	32	Latina	Working class	0	3	Taylor HS
Nicole	32	White	Working class	2	2	Taylor HS
Norma	36	Latina	Lower middle	1	1	Taylor HS
Sylvia	44	Latina	Lower middle	2	0	Taylor HS
Kirk	45	White	Lower middle	1	1	Taylor HS
Sheila	48	White	Lower middle	1	2	Eastside HS
Ron	50	White	Working class	1	1	Eastside HS
Rosalia	43	Latina	Poor	5	0	Eastside HS
Shawna	45	Black	Lower middle	1	1	Eastside HS
Juanita*	34	Latina	Working class	3	3	Eastside HS
Hector*	35	Latino	Working class	3	3	Eastside HS
Renae	43	Black	Working class	0	2	Eastside HS
Ellena	41	Latina	Working class	2	1	Eastside HS
Delores	33	Latina	Lower middle	1	0	Eastside HS
Angie	42	Latina	Working class	1	1	Eastside HS
Penny	52	White	Lower middle	0	2	Eastside HS
Charlene	37	Black	Poor	2	1	Eastside HS
Greg	43	White	Lower middle	3	0	Eastside HS
Beth	39	White	Upper middle	0	1	Medlin HS
Rose	43	White	Upper middle	0	3	Medlin HS
Scott*	34	White	Lower middle	0	3	Medlin HS
Miranda*	37	White	Lower middle	0	3	Medlin HS
Gabriela	44	Latina	Upper middle	3	0	Medlin HS
Denise	52	Black	Lower middle	4	3	Medlin HS
Fern*	55	White	Lower middle	1	0	Medlin HS
Charles*	50	White	Lower middle	1	0	Medlin HS
Portia	46	Latina	Upper middle	1	1	Medlin HS
Paula	43	Latina	Upper middle	1	1	Hayden MS

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Social Class</u>	<u>Children</u>		<u>School</u>
				<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	
Josephina	31	Latina	Lower middle	0	2	Hayden MS
Kate	43	White	Lower middle	0	1	Hayden MS
Sharon	51	White	Upper middle	2	0	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Barb	55	White	Lower middle	5	2	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Gina	51	White	Upper middle	1	2	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Kim	45	Black	Lower middle	2	1	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Melissa	43	White	Upper middle	3	1	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Ruth	45	White	Upper middle	1	1	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Rebecca	49	White	Lower middle	0	1	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Robin	46	White	Upper middle	0	2	Hayden MS/Lake HS
Yolanda	30	Latina	Lower middle	2	2	Other
Olivia	32	Latina	Working class	1	0	Other
Corina	39	Black	Working class	3	0	Other

\*Couple interviewed together

In terms of social class, about one-fifth fall in an upper income bracket, classified as upper-middle class (n=10), half are categorized as lower-middle class (n=23), and almost one-third fall in a working class or poor income bracket (n=14). In order to capture the social and cultural aspects of class (Weber 1947), parents' social class location was based not simply on income, but also on the types of jobs they hold and their education levels. Hence, for example, parents who hold jobs that involve authority over others and that require credentials, such as a college degree, are classified as middle class (Lareau 2003). There was a large income range in the middle-class category, so this group was divided into two categories – lower middle and upper middle. For example, Kim has a college degree and is the director of a non-profit organization, but earns less than 25,000 dollars a year, so she was classified as lower-middle class. If, in a two-



parent household, parents had divergent class designations, the higher class category was assigned to the household, regardless of which parent held the defining job (Lareau 2003). Over half the parents have a college degree (n=27) and four have a post college degree. The rest reported some college (n=9), high school degree (n=2), and less than high school (n=5).

Forty parents indicated a religious affiliation, with Catholic being the most common (n=16), followed by Christian (n=11) and Baptist (n=5). Most of those who identified a religious affiliation said they attended religious services regularly. Seven parents said they had no religious affiliation. I asked all parents what they consider their political views to be. Perhaps reflecting Americans' sense that political discussion is best avoided because it can be divisive (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), about one half identified as politically moderate (n=13) or don't know/not political (n=9). The remaining parents identified politically as somewhat conservative (n=11), somewhat liberal (n=8), very liberal (n=5), very conservative (n=1), and libertarian (n=1).

Only seven of the parents have an only child and many have at least two teenagers, often a son and a daughter, providing an interesting contrast in terms of how they feel about and manage their children's sexuality. Two-thirds of the parents identified their relationship status as married or living with a partner (n=31). Eight said they are divorced, four are separated, two are widowed, and two identified as single. All study participants identified as heterosexual.

Additional Fieldwork

Along with the interviews I conducted with parents, the Health teachers at Taylor and Eastside High Schools allowed me to observe in their classrooms during the sex education portion of their health classes. Ms. F, the teacher at Taylor, allowed me to attend her two-week sex education segment in the fall of 2006. I sat in on two classes daily. Although Ms. F repeated the material in each class, the classes had their own texture and dynamic. In particular, student questions, when allowed, often took the discussion in a new and different direction. Attending two classes also afforded me the opportunity to chat with Ms. F in between classes. In addition to her regular Health class, Ms. F also offers a yearly two-day STD presentation to all ninth grade students at her school. I attended this event in the spring of 2006.

Unlike Ms. F, Ms. S, the Health teacher at Eastside, brought in presenters during her sex ed unit and, on these occasions in the fall of 2006, invited me to observe. Thus, I saw a presentation by former teen parents and an abstinence-only sex educator's presentation. The one and one-half hour teen parent presentation was offered through a program titled No Kidding: Straight Talk From Teen Parents. Although not technically all teen parents (one presenter had her first child in her early 20s), they all had children early (and, significantly, outside of marriage). The group consisted of two mothers (one White, one Black) and one father (who is Black). Their presentation provides "a memorable message about paternity establishment, father involvement, the challenges of parenting, and the benefits of postponing parenthood until economically stable and in a marital relationship" ([www.oag.state.tx.us/cs/ofc/index.shtml#kidding](http://www.oag.state.tx.us/cs/ofc/index.shtml#kidding)).

The abstinence-only educator, Mr. M, works for LifeGuard, “a nonprofit organization that exists to further encourage and educate students, teachers and parents on current topics related to sexual health and abstinence in an effort to prevent unexpected pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and the emotional and psychological fallout from early sexual activity” ([www.austinflifeguard.com](http://www.austinflifeguard.com)). Mr. M is a White male in his mid-30s. He has been with LifeGuard as a presenter for six years. The presentation involved three one and one-half hour lectures. As Mr. M explained, he visits about 40 schools in the Austin Independent School district every school year, mostly high schools, but LifeGuard has recently expanded the program to include middle schools.

Lastly, I also attended five Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings at Hayden Middle School over the course of one and one-half years, between the spring of 2006 and the fall of 2007. As a way of taking “the pulse” of the PTA and the school in general, I attended PTA meetings that were broadly advertised to Hayden parents and featured invited guest speakers as a way to increase parental attendance. In addition, I attended parent information night at this school in the fall of 2006. While I draw only sparingly on this fieldwork in the chapters that follow, this research was invaluable to me in terms of establishing institutional discourses of adolescence and adolescent sexuality and learning how sex educators talk to their students about parents. This fieldwork also helps to anchor my interviews with parents to the larger cultural and sociopolitical context and, hence, avoid an “overly individualized and psychologized” analysis (Pascoe 2007, 17).

#### Organization of the Dissertation

My focus in this dissertation is on how parents make sense of and attempt to guide teen sexuality and how social and cultural forces shape these understandings and practices. I use the term sexuality throughout the dissertation to include sexual desire, behavior, and identity. Sexuality encompasses not simply what people do or do not do, but how they think about what they do, what they fantasize about doing sexually, and how they identify themselves as sexual beings. The parents in this study primarily focused on sexual behavior in their discussions with their children, but desire and identity were often present by their absence. Akin to the “evaded curriculum” of sex education, whereby concerns about and expressions of gender inequality and homophobia, for example, are ignored or avoided in sex ed classrooms (Fields forthcoming, 87), as we will see, sexual desire and identity often comprise parents’ evaded lessons about sexuality.

Throughout, I try to contextualize the discourses parents articulate and the strategies they employ within dominant societal discourses, including institutional discourses, of adolescence and adolescent sexuality. By discourse I mean “a set of ideas and practices that, when taken together, organize both the way a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it puts together social power” (Collins 2004, 17). Discourses give “meaning to the world” and “have implications for the social practices in which we engage” (Bettie 2003, 54). They are the things a society knows about itself and tend to reflect and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities.

As we have seen, the discourses of adolescent sexuality are highly contradictory, polarized, and reflect social inequalities: In short, adolescent sexuality in the U.S. is

depicted as a dangerous enterprise, full of perils and pitfalls; yet sexuality is now a fairly pervasive aspect of the American cultural landscape and is considered key to individual identity and personal fulfillment. The U.S. is a society characterized by a “paradoxical mix of sexual obsessions and sexual shames” (Rofes 2000, 442). Moreover, at this particular historical and cultural moment, children are increasingly portrayed as young and innocent and in need of protection but some, particularly Black and Latino youth, are also “adultified” (Ferguson 2000), with their behavior construed as intentional and malicious. Adults are increasingly understood as children’s protectors, yet also broadly framed as potential child abusers. Sex education is the site of controversial debates, primarily focusing on whether young people should learn about contraception or should be taught to abstain from sexual activity until they are married or old enough to handle the emotional and physical consequences of sex. Lastly, teenage motherhood and other social problems tied to adolescent sexuality are often understood to be problems of class and race/ethnicity.

In the midst of these polarized debates about sex education and contradictory discourses about sexuality, I set out to learn what parents of teenagers think about adolescent sexuality, in general, and their own children’s sexuality, in particular. As we will see, the 47 parents I interviewed do not consider their own teenagers as sexual subjects, yet they characterize teenagers in general as hypersexual. In this dissertation, I attempt to explain why parents might think this way. I argue that parents’ understandings are shaped by a number of cultural, structural, and psychological forces. For example, in chapter 2, I demonstrate that a pervasive culture of sexual fear and shame, coupled with

teenagers' economic dependence, make it difficult for parents to view their children as sexual beings. Chapter 2 also explores the tone, dynamics, and content of parent-child discussions about sexuality. Whereas previous research implies that parents teach their children about sexuality while their children listen and absorb these lessons, I show that parents *and* children are active participants in these talks and reveal the emotional and gendered dynamics of family sex talks.

Chapter 3 delves deeper into parents' understandings of and their strategies of control over their children's sexuality. In line with dominant discourses of adolescent sexuality, the parents I interviewed fear a whole host of sexual dangers confronting their teenagers. To keep their children safe, parents engage in strategies of protection and surveillance yet have different resources with which to do so. This chapter also examines how social inequality shapes, and is reproduced through, parents' understandings of, and interactions with their children about, sexuality. I argue that parents construct their children's peers as hypersexualized Others, and, in doing so, rely on and reproduce race, class, and gender stereotypes and inequalities.

In chapter 4, I look at parents' ambivalence about adolescent sexuality. As we have seen, much of the research on adolescent sexuality suggests that Americans hold strong and/or polarized views on this issue. My interviews with parents, instead, highlight conflict, contradiction, and ambiguity in parents' understandings and management of adolescent sexuality. In particular, this chapter shows how parental ambivalence about adolescent sexuality may be magnified by gender inequality. For example, we will hear from a mother who wants her teenage daughters to feel

empowered sexually, yet worries about how they will achieve this in a society that sexually objectifies girls and women while debasing those who seek sexual pleasure.

In the concluding chapter, I consider the social and cultural conditions that might facilitate parents' recognition of their children's sexuality. I argue that public policy designed to address the culture of sexual fear and dominant constructions of adolescence, as well as policies that tackle the conditions of social inequality in the U.S., would help to create an environment in which parents are better able to embrace and acknowledge their children's sexuality.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ASEXUAL TEEN: THINKING AND TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

Research on the role parents play in their adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors tends to fall into two broad camps: One endorses parental involvement in shaping adolescent sexuality (Baumeister et al. 1995; Dittus & Jaccard 1998; Hutchinson 2002; Resnick et al. 1997). The other is more critical of parental involvement, particularly of how parents may reproduce and reinforce gender inequality in their lessons to their children about sexuality (De Gaston et al. 1996; Martin 1996; Moore & Rosenthal 1991; Phillips 2000). Both camps, however, emphasize that parents play a critical role in shaping and influencing their children's sexual behaviors and experiences. Yet, this research is typically with teenagers themselves and rarely delves into parents' motivations for talking or not talking to their children about sexuality and parents' subjective understandings of these talks.

In this chapter, I explore how parents understand adolescent sexuality in general, and their own teenagers' sexuality in particular. Parents' understandings of adolescent sexuality matter because these notions shape how they talk to their children about sexuality, as well as how they try to manage their children's sexuality. As we will see, these understandings are shaped by dominant ideas about adolescence, adolescent sexuality, and parenting.



The parents I interviewed do not, on a whole, see their biological children as sexual beings, despite viewing adolescents in general as sexually active and sexualized in society. In this chapter, I begin to explore how and why parents construct their children as asexual. I argue that while parents have an investment in viewing their children as asexual, they perceive their children as active conspirators in their own asexualization. Whereas studies typically assume a one-way interaction when parents discuss sexuality with their children – that is, that parents talk and children listen and learn – my research suggests a more *relational* reading of family sex talks and highlights the gendered and emotional contours of these interactions.

“They’re a Little Immature for Their Ages”

Consistently the parents I interviewed, and, in particular, the middle-class parents, characterized their children as young, immature, and irresponsible. Beatrice’s (52, White, lower middle class) comment about her 16-year-old daughter typifies this viewpoint: “One thing I’ve noticed is that she’s probably a little bit more immature than some of her friends, and that’s okay, I think it will come.” Echoing Beatrice, Ellena (41, Latina, working class) says her 16-year-old daughter “seems very young or immature at times.” Although I interviewed far more mothers than fathers, the few fathers I interviewed also view their children as less mature than their peers. Ron (50, White, working class) sees both his 15-year-old son and his 17-year-old daughter as immature:

They’re a little immature for their ages. Well, my daughter especially.

She still acts a little younger than most 17-year-olds. She looks younger than [17] to me too. Which, we really don’t mind though. We don’t mind that. Because,

we can sort of regulate it a little bit easier when she gets little questions and things like that.

Ron constructs his daughter, in particular, as younger than her peers, both in terms of how she acts and how she looks. Importantly, he observes that this has made parenting easier because his daughter has not asked difficult questions about sex and has seemingly acquiesced to her parents' answers in that department. He feels her immaturity relative to her peers has delayed her interest in sex, which relieves him.

Indeed, many parents rely on their understanding of their children as young and immature in their construction of their children as 1) asexual and 2) not yet capable of handling the responsibilities that accompany sexual activity. For example, Kate (43, White lower middle class) thinks that her 14-year-old son is too young to have sex: "I don't think it's safe for his age. Maybe it's just him, I don't know. But he's a little naïve." As she spoke of her fears for her son, I came to see that Kate considers much of the dangers her son faces as coming from peer pressure. She constructs her son as young and naïve, while viewing his peers as much more advanced. Within this equation, her son's peers have a great deal of power in terms of their ability to exert a negative influence on her son:

*Sinikka:* What is it about this age or his naivety that you don't feel he'd be safe?

*Kate:* I don't know. I...(sighs).

*Sinikka:* Is it that he wouldn't use protection?

*Kate:* Yeah? Or maybe, I guess, [that] he'd do something he didn't want to do. Get pushed into something or let himself be pushed into something. I think he would definitely do that. I'm not going to be cool if I don't do this.

Kate has a difficult time imagining her son might experience sexual desire, at least not at his age. Like Ron she views her teenager as asexual. However, she is concerned that he might succumb to sexual activity to appear cool in his peers' eyes. Her fears center less on whether he will use contraception or not, and more on her son finding himself in a situation that he may not be ready to handle. Ultimately, she worries that her son might become sexually active before he develops an interest in sex. Along the same vein, Rosalia (43, Latina, poor), who has five daughters ranging in age from 22 to 9-years-old, does not allow her daughters to date or go out on their own until they are 18 because before that "they're gullible. They'll just believe anything. They're naïve, I guess."

Hence, age and maturity are crucial to parents' understandings of their children's sexuality. For some parents, sex is an adult activity. Talking about sex with their teenager is difficult because it raises the possibility that their teen might be sexually active, and, thus, a sexual being. This risks upsetting the dynamics of their relationship. I began to suspect this after interviewing Paula (43, Latina, middle class). Paula has not talked with her 14-year-old son about sexuality. She explains why:

*Paula:* Well again, it goes back to, is this too much information too soon? Does he need to hear about this stuff? I mean, he's just a kid and so...

*Sinikka:* Do you think too much information would be harmful?

*Paula:* I don't know. I don't know. Maybe I just don't want to go there yet or don't want him to grow up. Cause sex is an adult thing.

*Sinikka:* In what way?

*Paula:* Well, just in, it's not something you can even do until you've reached a certain physical maturity and, the outcomes of sex – like pregnancy or disease – these are very adult consequences. They can stay with you for life.

For Paula, discussing sex with her son implies that he is growing up. Because Paula conceives of sex as intercourse, and intercourse as an adult enterprise with adult consequences, talking about sex threatens to shift the dynamics of her relationship with her son from an adult-child one to an adult-adult one, something for which she is not yet ready. In discussing why she would have difficulty allowing her 16-year-old daughter to have a boyfriend sleepover while still a teen, Beatrice (52, White, lower middle class) states that it would transform their relationship:

That would be...I don't know, wow. [Because] I guess [it would seem as though] we're condoning extramarital sex and she still is a minor. I mean, even though she's sixteen, to me, she's –. And I don't know if we're ready for that parent-child relationship to change. Because she would be more grown up, *way* more grown up. I'm not ready for that.

Beatrice cannot imagine allowing a sleepover, even if she knew her daughter was sexually active, not simply because it condones sexual activity, but also because she is not ready for how that might shift the dynamics of their relationship. Being in an overt sexual relationship would signal that her daughter is “way more grown up.” This was a

common understanding among the parents I interviewed. In her study of American and Dutch parents attitudes about adolescent sexuality, Schalet (2000) observes that the American parents of teenagers, unlike the Dutch parents, emphasize the importance of hierarchical, authoritarian parent-child relationships as a way to maintain control over their teenagers. This type of relationship seems to depend on teenagers' youth and immaturity, reflected in their lack of sexual experience and knowledge.

However, Beatrice was more conflicted than many other parents who simply feel that teenagers should not have sex. She wants her daughter to have a safe and fulfilling sex-life and thinks prohibiting a sleepover might contradict this stated aim: "I would rather them do it at our house than in a car or somewhere else. But I'd still have reservations about that." She articulates a view that a minority of the parents I interviewed expressed: although she accepts that her daughter may have sex as a teen, teenage sexual activity should still be covert. That is, teenagers may be sexually active, but parents should not have to know about it. Ultimately, she said her husband would never agree to a sleepover: "My husband wouldn't. He would absolutely, absolutely not. No he wouldn't." This means, she said, she will not have to face the dilemma of whether to allow her daughter to have sex under her roof or not.

Some middle-class parents said they were delaying discussions of sex with their children until they leave for college. A precocious reader, the summer before Gabriela's (44, Latina, upper middle class) daughter started first grade, she found and read a copy of Judy Blume's *Are you there God? It's me Margaret*. Afterwards, she asked Gabriela, "Mom, what's a period?" Gabriela said she was caught completely off-guard by this

question: “I said, ‘It’s the punctuation mark at the end of the sentence.’ And she said ‘No, I don’t think that’s what they’re talking about.’ I think I just blew it off, changed the subject or something but I’ll never forget that.” After this incident, Gabriela found the book and “put it away for a couple of years.” She did eventually talk to her daughter about menstruation when her daughter asked a few questions “in fifth grade when her school did the puberty program.” However, she has not talked to her about sex. Gabriela thinks her daughter, who is now 16, is still too young to talk about sex because she is too young to have sex:

*Sinikka:* When do you think she’ll be ready to talk about these things?

*Gabriela:* I’m hoping that not until she’s ready to go off to college.

*Sinikka:* How do you think the conversation will go?

*Gabriela:* Well the conversation will probably be that we will prefer that she abstain until she’s older and she feels that she is in a very committed relationship, but here’s the information just in case. I will probably present it as, here are our feelings and here is the information.

Parents, like Gabriela, do not necessarily think their college-bound children will be full adults when they leave for college, but college signals a slightly more adult status. Sylvia (44, Latina, lower middle class) explains that she will consider her now 15- and 14-year-old daughters adults once they have graduated from high school: “I guess [I’ll consider them adults at] 18, when they graduate from high school. Because then they’re going to college and they’re off on their own and you’re not going to be there to look after them.” College represents a transformation of the parent-child relationship for

Sylvia because it is a time when she envisions her daughters being more self-reliant. College also represents an achievement – it means a teenager has made it through high school with decent grades, has done well enough on his/her SATs, and has successfully applied and been accepted to a university. In a culture that values self-reliance and individual achievement, college, hence, becomes an important milestone on the road to adulthood.

Like Gabriela, Sylvia thinks that college is the time when young people can become sexually active, although she acknowledges that not all teens wait until college:

*Sylvia:* The way the teens are now, I...I know that they're out there doing it. But I wouldn't want it for my girls.

*Sinikka:* Why not?

*Sylvia:* I would rather they wait. I would rather they wait until after high school.

Once they're in college, if they feel that they're in a serious relationship. Gabriela and Sylvia also reveal that college represents the time for young people to develop serious, committed relationships. As I discuss in chapter 3, many parents discourage, and some forbid, their children from dating in middle and high school. Middle-class parents, in particular, encourage their teenagers to look upon dating as a casual enterprise and to avoid being tied to one person until they are older.

For many parents, then, teenagers are asexual until proven otherwise and sometimes even then, as Portia's (46, Latina, upper middle class) story reveals. Last year Portia had two major "whammies." Her then 13-year-old daughter became anorexic and eventually lost so much weight that she was hospitalized. Portia spent nine weeks with

her daughter at an eating disorder clinic in another city, battling for her life and recovery. When Portia returned home nine weeks later, her then 15-year-old son came to her with the news that his girlfriend might be pregnant. Portia tried to handle this news very calmly and rationally. She explains her rationale: “I didn’t want to dwell on it because I was really uncomfortable and they were kids exploring, the both of them were. Neither one was necessarily experienced. It’s just an opportunity presented itself.” Portia labels her son and girlfriend’s sexual activity as “kids exploring” and downplays their previous experience. The way Portia describes her son’s sexual activity is similar how studies have documented teenage girls describing sex, as something that “just happens,” removing forethought and even desire from sexual activity (Martin 1996; Phillips 2000; Thompson 1995). These studies highlight that it is difficult for girls to acknowledge their own sexual desire in a society that often punishes girls for being sexually active. This same dynamic was prevalent among the parents of sexually active teenagers I interviewed. Like Portia, they do not describe their teenagers’ sexual activity in agentic, positive terms.

As it turns out, Portia’s son’s girlfriend was not pregnant. I asked Portia if they had been using contraception and she said she was fairly certain they had not because it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. But as well, she said, she had not previously talked with her son about contraception, “Because he was such a young teenager and I really didn’t think. And again, this is a really good solid kid, level-headed in a lot of ways, and had made pretty good decisions previously, so, no I – no, I just didn’t.” Prior to this incident, Portia saw her son as too young to need information about contraception, but



also makes it clear that, as a responsible, high achieving, “good solid kid,” her son does not fit her stereotype of a sexually active teen.

I later asked Portia if she has since talked with her now 16-year-old son about sex or contraception. Her answer clearly shows her reluctance to see her son as a sexual subject: “Well, since then, he broke up with her. So, no, because he’s not dating, we haven’t talked about it.” Portia and her husband have forbidden their son from dating until he graduates from high school. Once he goes to college, Portia feels he will be ready to date again and thinks that will be the time to discuss contraception. She emphasized to me many times that “he is a good kid who just got in over his head.” She does not want one pregnancy scare to define her son and certainly does not believe it signals his continued sexual activity. Her reluctance to see her son as sexual because he is a good kid, illustrates that she equates sexual activity with being bad. By dichotomizing good kids as asexual and bad kids as sexual, she is unable to reconcile her feelings about her (good) son with his (bad) sexual activity.

Other parents recognize that their teenager “may not be a perfect angel” (Beth, 39, White, upper middle class), but still have a difficult time acknowledging his or her sexuality. For example, when her now 16-year-old son was in sixth grade, Beth’s husband, whom she had recently married, discovered that her son had been downloading pornographic images onto his computer since fifth grade: “He had a ton, a *ton* of porno pictures.” Later, after they confiscated the computer, Beth and her husband found out that her son was recording porn in the middle of the night, watching it during the day, and

then erasing it. Beth and her husband have made it clear that watching any kind of pornography while still living at home is unacceptable:

[My husband] doesn't come out and say that it's immoral, that you should never do it because he would probably be a hypocrite if he did. His thing is, "You're just too young to be looking at things like that right now. And in our house these are our rules and you're going to have to do what we say. When you're eighteen and on your own computer, you pay for your own computer and your own TV and your own service, you can do whatever you want. But whenever you're in our house you live by our rules."

Beth overcomes her ambivalence about pornography by asserting her son's youthfulness and economic dependence as reasons why he should not watch it. This strategic use of age and dependence helps her maintain a notion of her son as asexual and innocent despite his interest in pornography.

For example, Beth is fairly certain her son is a virgin because he has told her as much and because he has not dated. She says she has had no trouble talking to her son about waiting to have sex: "Telling him there's absolutely nothing wrong in remaining a virgin and not having sex, those things are easy to say." But she finds it harder to talk to him about contraception, and, to date, has not. She explains why:

It is harder to say if you're going to have sex, you need to make sure to have protection. It's harder to say that as a parent because you want to believe that they're not going to do it at that point in time, which probably, definitely is not a good attitude to have because I've been surprised a lot by what they're doing. He

surprises me a lot. And I don't know why that is. As far as, like we have this selective forgetfulness about things that we did as kids. Because we thought we were so old at that age to go out and do those things. But when you look at your child, they're just so little and young. You just don't think of them ever even thinking about those things. It's hard to even think about what you should be saying to kids. You don't think they are old enough when you think about those things.

Beth expresses what many parents I interviewed said: Despite remembering what it was like to be a teenager and despite the fact that her son "surprises her a lot" (in the past few years, he has been caught smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, and downloading and recording porn), she views him as "little and young" and cannot imagine him as a sexual being. She believes she should probably talk to her son about sex, but has no idea of what to say or how to go about it: "It's hard to even think about what you should be saying."

This understanding of one's own children as young and little means that parents may be caught off-guard when they find out their child is sexually active. Some parents I interviewed, for example, learned that their children were having sex when they announced a pregnancy (or pregnancy scare, as in Portia's case). Teresa's (43, Latina, working class) now 21-year-old daughter was 17 when she told Teresa she was four months pregnant. Teresa describes her reaction: "I practically almost choked on a piece of chicken when she told me. She wasn't going to tell me (laughs). And she never hardly dated anybody, so it was just like an intense shock to me when she told me." As a

shy, quiet teen who had hardly dated, Teresa's daughter did not fit her understanding of a sexually active teen: the pregnancy came out of the blue.

I do not want to give the impression, however, that the parents I interviewed do not talk to their children about contraception. Over three-quarters of the parents I interviewed said they have talked to their children about contraception. Of the eleven parents in this study who have not talked to their children about contraception, five said they have avoided these discussions for religious reasons (4 mothers, 1 father). These parents say they expect their children to remain sexually abstinent until marriage and that discussing contraception with them, other than pointing out that contraception fails, would contradict that expectation. The other six parents, all mothers, did not identify a particular reason for not talking to their children about contraception. Most said they simply do not know how to talk to their children about this topic and their discomfort and their sense that their children cannot handle or do not need this information have prevented this conversation from occurring. Of note, five of the six mothers in this group either only have teenage sons or have a teenage son as their oldest child. As I discuss later in this chapter, gender dynamics shape mother-son discussions about sexuality. Five of these six mothers are also upper middle class. The problems associated with adolescent sexuality, such as teen pregnancy, are often framed as a consequence of poor family values among low-income families (Bettie 2003; Kaplan 1996; Luttrell 2003), thus these mothers perhaps felt more confident, because of their class privilege, in telling me they have not talked about contraception or perhaps they feel their class privilege in some ways buffers their children from the need for contraceptive information.

The parents who have talked to their children about contraception comprise a heterogeneous group, ranging from very religious to not at all religious, poor to upper middle class, and with children of all ages. Yet, the ways they describe their children and these talks about contraception reveal that they too are reluctant to view their children as sexual subjects. These parents provide the information because they see it as their duty and as necessary to protect their children, but they do not necessarily see any immediacy to their children needing the information. For example, many of the mothers of daughters I interviewed said they tell their daughters they will help them get on birth control “if and when” they decide they are ready to have sex. Pamela (47, White, lower middle class) and her husband have told their 15-year-old daughter they will support her decision to become sexually active:

I tell her, and my husbands tells her also, “If and when the time comes – and it will come – if and when you want to have sex with someone – not that we’re saying go do it – let us know, and we’ll go get you on the pill, we’ll get you some protection.” And so it’s that kind of thing that we talk about.

Although she uses the disclaimer “if and when,” Pamela also emphatically tells her daughter that there will eventually come a time when she will want to have sex and, while being careful not to appear to encourage her daughter to have sex, says she will help her daughter get on birth control. Yet, when I asked parents like Pamela whether they would help their daughter get on birth control at the age of 14 or 15, most balked and said that, at that age, they would strongly discourage them from having sex. Some

feel that 16 is still too young and would prefer their daughters do not come to them with that request until they have graduated from high school, if at all.

But as well, as Pamela suggests above, many parents fear that by talking about contraception, they may appear to tacitly condone sexual activity and are careful to explain to their children that this is not the case. Sylvia (44, Latina, lower middle class) describes talking to her 15-year-old daughter about contraception: “I have talked to her once where I told her that, ‘I’m not saying that I approve or that I condone having sex at an early age, but, if you do,’ I said, ‘I expect you to either tell me or have protection.’” In addition, most of the parents said they will not make contraception available to their children without first being requested to do so. Parents fear that, by providing contraception, they may encourage their children to become sexually active. Yolanda (30, Latina, lower middle class), who has a 13-year-old daughter, is the only parent I talked to who plans to get her daughter on birth control, whether her daughter requests it or not. Yet, she agonizes over the timing: “I don’t want to wait until it’s too late. But I don’t want to put her on it and let her say, ‘Oh, now that I have birth control, it’s okay.’ So that’s my biggest challenge right now.”

Hence, the parents I interviewed fear that by talking about sex openly and by helping their children obtain birth control, they themselves may be viewed as irresponsible, as encouraging teen sexual activity. A common argument used by those who oppose sex education is that talking and teaching about sex incites sexual activity (Irvine 2002; Luker 2006). In addition, in her analysis of the sex ed debates, Irvine (2002) found that a highly effective strategy of comprehensive sex ed opponents has been

to demonize and stigmatize sex educators and sex ed proponents, to cast them as depraved and even as potential sexual predators. Parents draw on these broader discourses in discussing contraception with their children, as well as in their considerations about when and whether to provide contraception. They do not want their children to have unprotected sex, but nor do they want to give the impression that they approve of teenage sexual activity, for many parents believe this puts them in a morally precarious, and even dubious, position.

Age and maturity also influence parents' understandings of sexually active, contraception-using children. Two of the parents I interviewed who know their teenagers are sexually active and have provided birth control expressed misgivings that they have allowed their children to take on adult responsibilities. Norma (36, Latina, lower middle class), whose 17-year-old daughter has been on birth control for two years, feels that this has weighed her daughter down with adult concerns:

On hindsight, I wish – I feel bad for her having to make adult choices so young in life, dealing with adult issues so early on. Having to go to the doctor every year like you're supposed to as a woman would. Having the responsibility of having to always take that contraceptive.

Similarly, when Nicole (32, White, working class) heard rumors that her 16-year-old son was sexually active, she bought him a box of condoms. She describes buying her son condoms as “a hard thing for me to do. I told him that I prefer that if he was going to be active, be safe about it. I don't prefer that he does it, you know, ‘You should be married. You shouldn't have to deal with this right now.’” Norma and Nicole described their

teenagers' sexual activity and use of contraception in primarily negative terms and spoke of their regret that their teenagers have not delayed being sexually active because it has introduced adult worries and responsibilities into their lives.

Thus, while many of the parents have talked about contraception and some have even provided their teenagers with contraception, the content of their talks tends to focus on possible future sexual activity (defined as heterosexual intercourse) and how to minimize risk. This continues to negate their teenagers' sexuality. Most of the parents do not currently view their teenager as sexual, but as potentially becoming so through heterosexual intercourse, thereby reproducing heteronormative notions of heterosexuality as natural and ideal (Valocchi 2005; Warner 1999). Their discussions about sex with their children revolve around a time, in the future, when they may engage in sexual intercourse and how they can guard against pregnancy, disease, and victimization. Kim (45, Black, lower middle class) explains that she emphasizes consequences when she talks to her 17-year-old son, 12-year-old niece, and 10-year-old daughter: "[I tell them] 'Procreation is real. I don't care what anybody says, when you have sex, there's only the potential for a baby to pop up, no matter what precautions you take.'" In fact, as I discuss in the next chapter, very few of the parents I interviewed have discussed sexual pleasure with their children. Most parents said, for example, that they are too embarrassed to talk to their children about masturbation. Those that have talked about masturbation often did so because they caught their child (always a son) masturbating and felt it was necessary to explain that while masturbating may feel good and is normal, it is something that should be done in private.



Some parents say their discussion of masturbation with their children led to a broader discussion of sexual touching and danger. Olivia (32, Latina, working class), for example, who was one of the few parents I interviewed who had talked to a daughter about masturbation, told her 14-year-old daughter:

I said, “From time to time, you may or may not want to [masturbate].” I said, “But you may actually start washing yourself down there and it may feel good.” I said, “No big deal.” But that brought into a whole other subject about knowing your boundaries when somebody touches you. I said, “If you feel something [when someone else touches you] then that means that that’s bad. And you should never feel uncomfortable about someone touching you, especially down there.” I said, “You’ve got to be honest with me. Open and honest.” She’s like, “Okay, okay.”

Olivia wants her daughter to feel like masturbation is “no big deal.” But she also seems concerned that if her daughter enjoys the sensation of touching herself, she may not respond appropriately if someone else touches her “down there.” So she cautions her daughter – it is okay to masturbate, but it is not okay for anyone else to touch her. Hence, masturbation is introduced but the conversation quickly segues to danger.

Although pleasure is often absent from parents’ discussions of sexuality (see chapter 3), in line with dominant discourses of sexuality in the U.S., danger is ever present. As Gail (58, multiracial, lower middle class) puts it:

It used to be that getting pregnant was the scary thing of having sex before marriage. That’s one of the nice things that can happen nowadays. I mean,

there's some pretty snag nasty diseases running out there now...I saw a thing on the TV the other day that said three out of four HIV positive people do not inform their partner. *Three* out of four do not inform their partner! And then the next thing was, because a lot of them don't even know they're positive yet. I think the kids need to know that.

According to Gail, an unplanned pregnancy is now one of the more positive outcomes of teenage sexual activity, eclipsed by life threatening sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). She says the stakes are too high when it comes to teenagers and sex. Gail's quote above also highlights the role media plays in shaping parents' understandings of the dangers young people face.

Like Gail, many parents discussed their fears and worries about STDs. In particular, parents frequently mentioned HIV and AIDS in their interviews. In the nineties, numerous public health campaigns and mandatory HIV/AIDS education and prevention programs were initiated. These have raised and maintained awareness about HIV/AIDS, including information about infection rates and transmission. Indeed, I found in this post-AIDS era, many of the parents I interviewed were informed and concerned about HIV/AIDS. Some parents also discussed their fears about the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is currently the most common STD among young, sexually active people and has recently received a great deal of attention in the media and in public health campaigns, in part because of infection rates, but also because of the link between certain types of HPV and cervical cancer (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2000). For example, Melissa (43, White, upper middle class), who has three

teenagers, raised the issue of HPV in her interview: “HPV is rampant. It is not [spread solely through] sexual intercourse; it is skin-to-skin. That’s why we have twenty-year-olds that are dying of uterine cancer and ovarian cancer – at twenty years old! It is a *very* serious business.” While most parents were not as specific as Melissa, many discussed their fears about lifelong and life-threatening sexually transmitted diseases and often tied these concerns specifically to sexually active teenagers, suggesting these understandings may play a powerful role in their desire to see their own children as asexual and, therefore, safe from the dangerous consequences of sex.

#### Other People’s Children

That many parents have a difficult time seeing their children as sexual subjects became especially clear to me when I interviewed parents who are caring for (or have cared for) nonbiological children, including stepchildren, nieces, and nephews (6 respondents fit in this category). Parents who are currently raising or taking care of children other than their own, or who have done so in the past, discussed these teens in much more sexual terms than their own children. For example, Kelly’s (37, White, working class) 16-year-old niece recently lived with Kelly and her two teenage sons for six months. During that time, Kelly said:

I realized that my boys are pretty good, and I have no major complaints about how they act. Because this girl, she was very openly sexual and all she could think about was the next time she got to go see this guy. I would let the guy come in [her bedroom] and study with the door open. And it would get quiet and I

would go in to check and she would actually be on top of him, kissing him. I was like, “Uh-oh. No. You go home. That was a test and you failed. Get out.” In general, Kelly thinks “kids are moving too fast these days.” By contrast, Kelly says her sons are not “even interested in acting like that. They have higher goals for themselves.” Like Portia who has trouble viewing her good son as sexually active because she views sexual activity in terms of deviance, Kelly separates her sons, whom she believes are not sexual, from other teenagers, like her niece, who are “openly sexual.” She thinks the primary difference is that her sons are goal oriented and will not be sidetracked by sexual activity.

Many of these parents see the problems and sexualized behavior that the nonbiological children in their care exhibit as evidence that they have not had proper adult guidance and supervision. Kim, who is caring for her 12-year-old niece in addition to her own two children believes that the bad decisions her niece regularly makes, like wearing “something that violates the [school] dress code and telling lies,” stems from her lack of an authority figure: “My mother had [custody of] her from the time she was about six or seven years old and our parenting styles were a little bit different. So when I got custody of her, she had a couple of habits that I do not like.” Similarly, Gail (58, multiracial, lower middle class) is currently caring for her 15-year-old stepgrandson. He is her daughter’s husband’s child from a previous relationship. As she explained, “he’s not actually any blood relation.” Gail describes her stepgrandson’s upbringing as chaotic:

You know, he’d call crying. “What’s wrong?” “Well, Mom left yesterday to go to 7-11 and she hasn’t come back.” And the kid’s like nine years old. So they’d

go get him. I mean, it was a very bad situation and because of that, he grew up with some pretty —. He just doesn't have the standards that a child of his age should have already. He didn't have the stability and the guidance that he should have had. So now he's really struggling. He wants to be good. He wants to do what's right. He wants to do all this. And yet, he tends to fall into the patterns he grew up with.

According to Gail, her stepgrandson is confused about sexuality because he has not had proper moral guidance. She had numerous stories to tell me about his sexual escapades: She has seen him masturbating and, because he was doing this with his blinds open and because his bedroom is at the front of the house, she suspects the neighbors have also witnessed this. “So I said, ‘You know what, if you *have* to, shut the blinds. Do it in private (laughs).’” She caught him making out with a girl who lives down the street. She found out he French kissed a girl he hardly knew on the school bus and that he has fondled girls at school.

I was startled by the explicit stories Gail shared with me about her stepgrandson. Gail was the fourth person I interviewed and I had not heard stories like this from any of the other parents. I asked her how she knows so much about her stepgrandson's activities and she exclaimed, “He tells me! [He will come to me and say], ‘Grandma, I feel bad because, you know, I fondled this girl's butt twice today.’” Gail believes her stepgrandson discloses this information because “he's trying to be good. And he's starting to get there, that's why he comes home and tells me.” As I interviewed more parents, however, I began to suspect that Gail is more aware of her stepgrandson's

sexuality not only because she is willing to see him as a sexual being (albeit a confused one), but also because *he* is more willing to allow her to see him as one. Compared to other parents I interviewed, Gail's stepgrandson appeared much more disposed to talk openly about sexuality and his own sexual forays and confusions with Gail. Similarly, Kelly not only seemed able to view her niece in sexualized terms, but also, described how her niece talked openly about her sexual yearnings in front of Kelly.

“Ew, Are You Doing That?!” Family Sex Talks and the Specter of Sexuality

My hunch that parents experience their children as active in their own asexualization was solidified during my interview with Gina (51, White, upper middle class). Gina has three children – her sons are 19 and 14 years old and her daughter is 12 years old. While interviewing Gina, her 19-year-old son, Matthew, who had just recently come home for summer break after his first year of college, arrived. Gina introduced me as “a UT student who’s researching parents’ interactions with kids in talking about sex.” Upon hearing this, Matthew asked me to start my tape recorder. He wanted it on the record “that parents should never, *ever* talk to their kids about sex.” As an example, he told me about his friend who “jumped out of the car when his mom popped the question.” Below is the transcript of our conversation:

*Matthew:* He was in a moving car with his mom when she asked him – she’s like, “I think it’s time to talk to you about sex.” And he just unbuckled, opened and tucked and rolled out of the car (laughs).

*Sinikka:* How old was he?

*Matthew:* He was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. They were in the car together. He just literally was like, nuh uh.

*Sinikka:* So did you have the same reaction when your mom [brought up the subject]?

*Gina:* He didn't want to talk about it.

*Matthew:* We don't go there. Why would you want to go there? I don't. That's why I have school. That's what school teaches you. I don't need to learn it from you.

*Gina:* Well, she's wondering if school taught you well. Did you get the information you needed there?

*Matthew:* Use a condom?!

*Gina:* Well, that's right. Well, we've talked to him. I mean, we've -

*Matthew:* No we haven't.

*Gina:* I have talked to him.

*Matthew:* I don't listen. I just like, la la la (holds his hands over his ears).

*Sinikka:* Because you don't want to hear it from your mom?

*Matthew:* Oh yeah!

*Gina:* He thinks it's creepy from his mom. You don't want to even think that your parents have sex. You know. *That* is the creepiest.

*Matthew:* I don't want to go there. Parents and sex talks, just don't – shouldn't ever happen. Ever!

Our conversation is illuminating on a number of fronts. First, it suggests that teenage boys are uncomfortable talking about sex with their mothers and that there is a male teenage culture that reinforces this dynamic. Matthew's story of his friend who hurtled himself from a moving car to avoid discussing sex with his mom resembles an urban legend. However, toward the end of our conversation, Matthew mentioned a friend who talked to both his parents about his difficulties getting an erection:

*Gina:* Really! But you would tell us if that happened.

*Matthew:* No! No way! That's so weird!

*Gina:* Oh that's wrong because you had something going on and you asked [your stepfather] about it.

*Matthew:* Well, yeah, but that's the man-to-man thing. He's like not technically my dad.

Matthew reveals that he feels more comfortable talking to his stepfather about sex, both because he is a man and because he is not his biological father. Indeed, as we will see, many of the mothers I interviewed pointed to the difficulties they encounter talking to their sons about sexuality.

Almost all the parents I interviewed who have talked with their children about sex described their children's reaction as one of disgust, embarrassment, and anger. The parents' narratives highlight the enormous resistance they experience from their teenagers when it comes to family sex talks. The mothers I interviewed, in particular, spoke at length of both sons' and daughters' annoyance, anger, and protest when they broach the subject of sex. Yet, they appear to handle this differently depending on whether they are



dealing with a son or a daughter. Many of the mothers say they back off and let their sons come to them when they have questions whereas they push their daughters to talk. Kate (43, White, lower middle class) explains that she simply has to leave her 14-year-old son alone:

*Kate:* If [my son] asks me a question, I'll tell him and I'm honest. Other than that, I just leave him alone. I have to.

*Sinikka:* You have to?

*Kate:* I have to. I really have to. Yeah. Because I don't go in his room. I don't search through his stuff. His privacy, it just *has* to be honored. So I just kind of let him approach me. Well, with him not being talkative, I can't just say, "Hey, we need to talk about birth control!" He'll just shut down (laughs).

Kate feels she must honor her son's privacy, including avoiding directly talking to him about sexuality. She hopes that by leaving him alone he will be more likely to come to her with questions. Kate also revealed that, on the basis of being a mother, her son discredits the extent to which she knows anything: "[My son will say] 'Oh, you're trying to be a mom again.'"

Some mothers, like Charlene (37, Black, poor), described sons who react aggressively when they push them to talk. Charlene says her 19-year-old son often rejects her attempts to discuss anything with him:

When things are bothering him, he won't say. And you will ask, "What's the matter with you?" "Nuthin'." You talk to him about your day or something, he likes to turn his back. He *loves* to do that. And if he's in one of his little moods,

then he'll try to raise up like his voice or something. Because sometimes he gets like, "No, I'm gone. I'm a man."

Charlene says her son is not simply unwilling to talk at times, but has even responded to her queries with aggression. She notes that, on these occasions, he asserts his masculinity – "I'm a man" – for an explanation as to why he should not have to talk or listen to her, explicitly reinforcing male dominance and, by association, devaluing femininity. Like Kate, Charlene feels her son discredits her based on her status as his mother and a woman (Schur 1984). Charlene, however, stands her ground with her son. Sometimes she uses "reverse psychology." If her son comes to her and wants to talk or asks for help she does not respond: "[I tell him] 'You didn't have an answer for me when I just tried to ask you what was wrong with you.' So sometimes I don't answer."

In general, mothers articulated concern that boys will clam up if confronted with information they are not ready or willing to handle. Some mothers feel that sons need to be more independent from them than do their daughters. For example, as a single parent after her divorce, Ruth (45, White, upper middle class) worried about "overmothering" her son:

I remember reading this book that I thought was really interesting about how to create a scenario where, particularly where your son is acknowledged as different than being female. Women have a tendency, I think, to overmother. And in this book it was talking about overmothering and how, sometimes, your son might rebel against overmothering. And instead, you just have to put down some

expectations about what you expect from your son and let him do it on his own time.

Ruth implemented the strategies suggested by the book she read on overmothering post divorce and feels it has been a great success. She gives her son more leeway and less structure. However, her daughter has expressed resentment “that I don’t demand things of [her brother] at the same pace that I do of her.” As Ruth’s daughter observes, the tactics employed by Ruth and many other mothers of sons I interviewed, while heartfelt, serve to maintain a gender ideology of natural sex differences that buttress male dominance (Connell 1987; Osmond and Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987).

By contrast, some mothers I interviewed feel their daughters are receptive to their attempts to talk. In particular, because of a sense of shared bodies and shared experiences, mothers says their daughters are more willing to approach their mothers with questions about bodily changes during puberty. Yolanda (30, Latina, lower middle class) says her 13-year-old daughter has come to her lately to ask about her changing body: “She’s gotten to the point where she’ll ask, ‘Mom, you know, is it normal for me to –.’ She’s like, ‘I haven’t had my cycle, but I feel wet or whatever.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, that’s normal. We’ll buy you some panty shields.’” Yolanda emphasizes, however, that most of her daughter’s questions are about puberty and even then “she doesn’t really ask too many questions, and I tend to probably give her more information than she wants to know.” Similarly, Paula (43, Latina, upper middle class) says her 10-year-old daughter has always been more willing than her 14-year-old son to ask both her parents questions about her body. But, according to Paula, she wants her parents’

responses to be short and to the point: “She’ll tell you, ‘You’re telling me more than I want to know.’ She goes for the answer and that’s it. So we haven’t gotten into anything very in-depth I guess. Just on the surface.”

Some mothers of daughters spoke about the difficulties they have talking to their daughters about sex. Sylvia (44, Latina, lower middle class), who has a 15- and 14-year-old daughter, says her 14-year-old does not handle discussions about sex very well: “My little one giggles and gets real immature about it, so we’ll just kind of let it go off.” Ruth (45, White, upper middle class) says that both her 16-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter roll their eyes and protest when she tries to talk about sexuality, but that, while her daughter does not want her to bring up the subject, she will come to her with questions, although these tend to be factual-based questions about her body, whereas her son prefers to speak to his dad. For example, Ruth said, “Right now, she’s asked a lot about – because she got her period at 13, she’s not regular – so we talk a lot about regularity.”

Some parents suspect that their teenagers’ negative attitudes toward sex talks are developmental. They see adolescence as a time when teens withdraw from parents. Sharon (51, White, upper middle class), for example, describes her 16-year-old daughter as moody and withdrawn but sees this as “typical:” ‘She says, ‘You don’t know anything about my life.’ And yet I can say, ‘Tell me about your school day.’ [And she will reply], ‘It was fine.’ You know what I mean? A lot of that is typical [teenage behavior].” Nicole (32, White, working class) says her 16-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter have acquired a know-it-all attitude:

Because they weren't thataway [when they were younger]. No. They actually listened to what I had to say and they didn't think everything I said was crap (laughs). Maybe it's because they did get older, but [now] if I tell them anything that I've been through, [they say], "No, mom, that's not how it goes!"

Nicole suspects her children may have acquired this attitude in part because of her divorce from their dad two years ago, but she also thinks it could be a natural part of adolescent development. Schalet (2000, 2004) also found that American parents frame their teenagers' behavior, which they described as being characterized by irrationality, irritability and a drawing away, as part of the natural maturation process.

Some parents hope that by the time adolescence arrives, they will have established open communication that will allow their teenagers to come to them with any questions about dating, sexual activity, or their bodies. But, at the same time, these parents believe that adolescence is a time when it is hardest of all for children to talk to their parents. When I asked Josephina (31, Latina, lower middle class) about the changes she has witnessed in her 14-year-old son as he has moved through adolescence, she replied:

In my son's case, he's not as willing to ask certain questions. Certain questions he asks very directly, especially those that are technically oriented. But those more about, what I'm going to feel? Or why do I feel this way? It's a little bit harder for him to approach even though I'm very open with him.

Josephina infers that these questions are hard for her son to ask because these are hard feelings for him to experience. She thinks adolescence is a tumultuous time and that her

son is confused by his bodily responses and emotions. The parents' narratives underscore that it is not simply that parents are uncomfortable or do not talk to their teens about sex, parents experience, or at least sense, resistance, from their teenagers when they attempt to initiate these conversations. This reminds us that parent-teen sex talks are not one-way; they are relational, with parents *and* teens active in their content and contours.

Second, my conversation with Gina and her son Matthew reveals that family sex talks evoke the specter of sexual intimacy. Matthew's choice of wording in describing his friend's mother's attempts to talk about sex is interesting. As Matthew puts it, his friend's mom "popped the question." This is a phrase traditionally used to describe a marriage proposal, suggesting that a mother asking her son about sex is akin to asking him to marry her (or at least that it introduces an apparently unwelcome sense of intimacy)! Similarly, Gina says, "You don't want to even think that your parents have sex. You know. *That* is the creepiest." Hence, just as the parents I interviewed have a difficult time seeing their children as sexual beings, some suspect that their children are reluctant to see them as sexual subjects and that family sex talks instigate these thoughts. Ruth (45, White, upper middle class), for example, says she may have talked to her children, who are now 16 and 14, about the pleasure that can come from sexual activity when they were younger, but that it has become harder as they have gotten older:

I think I did [talk about pleasure] when they were younger. And now it's a little bit more complicated. Even though I've been open with them, as kids they still don't want to know that I'm having sex. I think they still think it's something that their parents don't do really all that much. So even though my boyfriend spends

the night a lot, they just don't want to think about the fact that we're sexual together. I think it brings it up when I talk about pleasure. It brings up, Ew, are you doing that (laughs)?!

Ruth is squeamish about discussing pleasure with her son and daughter because she thinks it makes them think about her having sex, something with which she says none of them are particularly comfortable.

Many parents indicated to me that their sex life should remain private from their children. Rose (43, White, upper middle class) explains that she is uncomfortable talking about sex not only with her children, but also with close family members: "Some people don't care if they talk about sex, but I don't talk about sex with everybody I know. I mean, I don't even talk about it with my sister who's my closest friend relative. Just because it's a private thing." Rather than discuss her own sexual experiences, Rose talks to her 13-year-old son about sex in a more general way because "I want to make sure he knows all the risks that are out there." Thus, despite hoping that their children will come to them to talk about sex, many parents think it is inappropriate, unnecessary, or too uncomfortable to discuss their own sex lives with their children. This may be from a sense that sexual disclosure makes them vulnerable. One of the consequences of self-disclosure is that it diminishes one's power (Blau 1964). By refusing to disclose aspects of their sex lives, parents maintain their authority and demarcate adult-child boundaries. By drawing boundaries around their own complex sex lives, they also maintain a good sex/bad sex dichotomy. Good sex is implicitly private and the terrain of adults; bad sex is public and the terrain of adolescents (and sexual deviants).

But as well, as I talked to the parents, I came to think that their belief that their children are “grossed out” (Delores, 33, Latina, lower middle class) by their discussions of sex may also stem from a sense of sexual shame. Shame is a prevalent, and, many argue, necessary, aspect of social life that may call up feelings of rejection, embarrassment, and failure. “It is the ‘social emotion’ that arises from the ‘monitoring of one’s own actions by viewing one’s self from the standpoint of others’” (Stein 2001, 100). When feeling shame or shameful, individuals think that criticism or disapproval is emanating from others (Stein 2001, 2006). With its underpinnings in Christianity, sexual shame has historically dominated American culture (Irvine 2002; Stein 2006). The parents I interviewed grew up “in a culture where compulsory heterosexuality and antisex attitudes reigned supreme” (Stein 2006, 18) and are highly critical of *their* parents’ discussions of sex. Many described parents who either never spoke about sex or who encouraged very negative understandings of sexuality. Yet, while parents critiqued their parents’ sexual lessons, these lessons, along with larger discourses of sexuality, constitute part of their emotional and experiential landscape.

More recently, according to Stein (2006, 3), conservative groups have “mobilized to bring back sexual shame.” Irvine (2002) argues that the shaming tactics and discursive strategies adopted by the Right in their movement against sex education over the past few decades have worked, in large part, because of dominant understandings of sexuality. She writes, “Much of the symbolic power of aversive rhetorics derives from the stigma historically attached to sex. Conservatives have drawn on the tenacious power of sexual shame and fear to galvanize residents to oppose comprehensive programs” (Irvine, 2002,



195). Yet, shame may fuel some of these activists' fervor as well (Stein 2001). Stein (2001) observed in her interviews with anti-gay activists that many engaged in behaviors characteristic of shame: speaking very rapidly and without cessation, rambling and getting off topic, and apologizing regularly, for example.

I detected similar types of behaviors among the parents I interviewed when the topic of sex was raised. Many became flushed or red in the face. Some confessed complete ignorance about aspects of sexuality and apologized for their lack of knowledge or for rambling. Some spoke faster and in a clipped way, as though they wanted to rush through the discussion. Many either stumbled over or avoiding using the word sex or sexuality. I may have also unwittingly contributed to the shame some parents seemed to feel during their interview. I sometimes experienced embarrassment myself in the interviews, especially when asking parents about their own sex lives as teens. Parents may have picked up on my feelings that asking someone to talk about their sexual experiences is shameful, and this may have shaped their emotional response and the emotional overtones of the interviews.

Thus, while some parents may use shame in order to control their children's sexual behaviors, parents may also experience shame in connection with sexuality, including their own sexual feelings and practices (Stein 2006). They may feel exposed and shameful themselves when discussing, or considering talking about, sex with their children. Rebecca (49, White, lower middle class), who has not been able to talk to her 19-year-old son about sex because "he just shuts me out," said that she was so embarrassed when she found her son and his girlfriend in her apartment with tousled hair

a year ago, “I was like, ‘Can I get you guys a drink (laughs)?’ I just felt kinda funny around them, you know?” As such, shame seems to constitute one of the “feeling rules” of parent-child sex talks (and interactions) (Hochschild 1983, 56). Feeling rules involve social cues and cultural norms about how an individual *should* feel in any given interaction or context (Hochschild 1983). These emotional norms can serve to reproduce social inequality by establishing affective expectations, thereby regulating thought and emotion, and by identifying Others who do not perform the expected and culturally legitimated affect (Schwalbe et al. 2000). For example, an individual, including a parent or a child, who has no sexual shame may be deemed suspect and accordingly discredited or stigmatized. As Rose put it: “Some people don’t care if they talk about sex.” Thus, in the context of thinking and talking about sexuality, parents may experience, and establish, affective and discursive boundaries around “what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say what to whom” (Schwalbe et al. 2000, 435). In other words, even parents who want to have open conversations about sex with their children may signal otherwise through their emotional comportment.

Third, our conversation reveals a schism between teens’ and their parents’ understandings and recollections of sex talks at home. Teenagers and parents may not always agree on how much talk about sexuality goes on in the home. After Matthew left, Gina refuted his assertion that they had never talked about sex: “It’s open communication and so even though he says he doesn’t talk about it himself, we’ve talked about it. He just doesn’t – the concept of it, when forced to admit it, I don’t think he wants to admit it.”

Beth (39, White, upper middle class), who has a 16-year-old son, thinks it may be especially hard for mothers to talk to sons about sex (and for sons to hear their mothers talk about sex) because it violates “a mother’s role:”

I’m his mother and I do motherly things. I provide lunches and I am the caregiver and I just have this role and that role doesn’t encompass talking about strange things like that. And it kind of just kind of goes against the grain of a mother’s role to talk to her son about, about what he should and shouldn’t do regarding sex, because you’re involved and the nurturing type. I just feel like I have this role and it’s very awkward for me to go outside of that role. I did it when I was a single mother but once [my husband] came around I just let him take care of it. I don’t know if that’s good or bad but that’s what’s happened. It’s hard for both of us. It isn’t easy for me to talk to him about it and it’s not easy for him to listen to me talk about it. And so sometimes I feel if that’s the case then it’s kind of not worth it, because you’re too weirded out by it. You really don’t absorb what the conversation is about.

Beth points out that while she talked somewhat about sex with her son when she was a single mother, she was relieved to pass that job on to her husband. She explicitly states that talking about sex with her son engendered a kind of role dissonance: it violated her role as a mother and nurturer because sex talks, for Beth, fall outside the mother role. As she put it, “I just have this role and that role doesn’t encompass talking about strange things like that.” Social roles are highly complex patterns of living (Garfinkel 1967) that, many sociologists argue, are at the crux of our individual identities (Fein 1990).

According to Beth, sexual discussions go against the grain of what it means to be a mother. But her quote above also suggests that sex talks involve something deviant and “strange.” As such, it is an unnatural and uncomfortable topic to discuss. It is not simply a violation of her mother role; it is an awkward experience. Not only does Beth say she did not enjoy having sexual conversations with her son, she also thinks that boys may be so uncomfortable hearing their mothers talk about sex that they may block out what is being said. This suggests that teenagers’ reports of parental sexual instruction may not always mesh with parents’ recollections. Beth’s quote further reveals the complicated dynamics and undercurrents swirling around parent-teen sex talks.

Fourth, this conversation suggests that teenagers may dismiss their parents’ attempts to talk about sex by arguing that they have learned all they need to know in school. This was a common strand throughout my interviews. Although many parents find sex education useful in terms of sparking conversation in the home about sex, they also find that once children attend sex education at school, they are more likely to reject their parents’ attempts to discuss sex. Greg’s (44, White, middle class) description of his 18- and 17-year-old stepdaughters’ reaction when he and his wife attempt to generate a family discussion about sex typifies this: “[They say] ‘I know, I know, we learned all that in school already!’” Thus, parents observe, teenagers who have taken sex education or a puberty class (often this involves one one-hour class) use that class to rebuff their parents’ attempts to discuss sex at home.

Sex education teachers and presenters may also contribute to this dynamic. In the sex education classes I observed, teachers and presenters frequently referred to parents as

uninformed about sexuality. This may tacitly encourage young people to reject their parents' input. The sex education teachers also described parents as sexual conservatives. Ms. F, for example, the sex ed teacher at Taylor High School, told her students that their parents do not want her to talk about birth control but that she was going to anyway because she cares about their health and well-being. Similarly, in trying to get the students to think about the negative outcomes of sex, Mr. M, an abstinence-only educator who was a guest speaker at Eastside High School's health class asked rhetorically: "You come home [and say], 'Hey Mom, I had sex.' What do you expect? Clapping? No!" His implication is clearly that *all* mothers disapprove of teenage sexual activity.

Some parents, especially the working class and poor parents I interviewed, are relieved, however, that their children have received school-based sex education because they do not feel equipped to talk about sexuality. Angie (42, Latina, working class) is Cuban-American, having immigrated to the U.S. with her two children 7 years ago. She has never talked openly with her son about puberty or sexuality. She explains: "Because at school, you know, in the classes they explain, you know. He learn very good in that class, I think so (laughs). They like this class because they have the answers for that (laughs)." Similarly, Nicole (32, White, working class) thinks young people are more receptive to school-based sex ed than they are to family talks about sex because they are with their peers and they are in a learning environment:

They spend their alive hours, is what I call them, at school. So they're going to learn and listen. And for me, they've got their friends' influence in the class

while they're taking that, so I think they better absorb. Because they've got everybody's opinion around them.

### Conclusion

Most of the parents I interviewed described adolescents, in general, as highly sexual and sexualized, yet do not necessarily view their own teenagers in this light. The parents' stories and experiences reveal how difficult it is for them to view their children as sexual subjects. Several dynamics appear to be at play in explaining why this might be so. For one, seeing one's own child as a sexual subject may be hard because it threatens to change and/or challenge the dynamics of the parent-child relationship. Many of the parents think of sexuality as an adult entity and enterprise and, thus, if their children are sexual, they are grown up, leading to a massive overhaul of the parent-child relationship. Parents worry that with a shift in dynamics, their parenting might become unmoored; they would not know how to act toward their child. In addition to seeing sexual activity as an indicator of adulthood, however, almost all the parents I interviewed also use economic independence as a marker of adult status (Schalet 2000, 2004). A teenager's economic *dependence* contradicts the notion that he or she is an adult. Hence, many parents cannot envision an economically dependent *and* sexual teenager. They say their children can be sexual when they no longer live at home and are paying their own bills (most prefer that this also coincides with a time when they are married).

The parents view sex as an adult endeavor largely because they equate it with heterosexual intercourse. Most parents described their discussions of sex and sexuality with their teenagers as focusing on the risks and negative consequences of sexual

intercourse, including pregnancy, disease, and victimization. Some parents find it difficult to reconcile a teenager's sexual activity with their image of that child as innocent and good. For these parents, sexual activity is linked to promiscuity and deviance, something they do not associate with their own children.

A prevalent discourse of risk and fear dominates debates about, and depictions of, adolescent sexuality in the U.S. (Fields forthcoming; Irvine 1994; Luker 2006). Based on this hegemonic paradigm, sex equals intercourse equals danger. Although the sex education teachers I observed expanded this equation to include oral sex, they did so in order to point out that oral sex is just as dangerous as sexual intercourse (see also Fields forthcoming). Thus, it may be hard for parents to see their children as sexual because this would mean their children are imperiled. Looked at in this way, viewing children as young and asexual may be a psychological defense mechanism for parents; it means they do not have to confront the notion that their child daily faces the possibility of being sexually victimized, contracting a life-long and/or life-threatening disease, or becoming (or getting someone else) pregnant. Indeed, two parents I interviewed who know their teenagers are sexually active and have provided contraception expressed angst that their children have to deal with adult worries and responsibilities at such a young age.

Further underscoring parents' asexualization of their own children, parents who are caring for, or have cared for, children other than their own biological children appear more willing to see these teens as sexual subjects. Importantly, these parents view their nonbiological charge's sexuality as a sign that he or she did not have a good upbringing. Within this understanding, a sexual teen is conflated with parental failure. In general, I

found that, when it comes to raising children, parents are very hard on themselves and on other parents. Most of the parents I interviewed blame family breakdown and dysfunction for adolescent risk-taking and problem behaviors, including sexual activity. Hence, parents may be better able to recognize a nonbiological child's sexuality, particularly if they have not raised that child wholly themselves, because this does not raise the specter of their own parental failure.

In addition, it may be difficult for parents to see their children as sexual because doing so elicits societal moral panics. One couple I interviewed described being investigated by Child Protective Services (CPS) because a friend overheard them making what sounded like a sexually suggestive joke with their 11-year-old daughter. Denise's (52, Black, lower middle class) adult daughter had a similar incident. Her son's (Denise's grandson) kindergarten teacher reported her to CPS for possible sexual abuse because he used the words "penis" and "vagina" in class. I found it especially ironic that CPS investigated a parent because her son used these words considering that a major part of the sex education classes I observed involved teaching middle and high school students to use scientific terms for reproductive and sexual processes. One middle school teacher I interviewed, Ms. B, hands out a four-page glossary of terms at the beginning of her sex ed unit and told me she quizzes her students daily on these terms (see Table 2). Jessica Fields (forthcoming) also found in her study of school-based sex education that teachers adopt what she calls "a naturalist perspective," teaching about bodies, puberty, and sex just as they would teach any other scientific topic, such as human digestion or



Table 2. Ms. B's Glossary of Sexual and Reproductive Terms

## Glossary

<b>Amenorrhea:</b>	(a-men-o-re'a) Absence of menstrual periods.
<b>Anus:</b>	(a'-nus) The outlet of the rectum (the lower part of the large intestine), through which solid waste leaves the body.
<b>Areola:</b>	(a-re-o-la) The darker pigmented area surrounding the nipple.
<b>Birth canal:</b>	Another term for vagina; the passage a fetus travels through during birth.
<b>Bladder:</b>	The organ that holds urine, liquid body waste.
<b>Bloating:</b>	Swollen beyond normal size due to retaining of fluid.
<b>Breast buds:</b>	The first stage of breast development during puberty; small swellings directly underneath the nipple.
<b>Cardiovascular:</b>	(car-de-o-vas'-cu-lar) Relating to the heart and blood vessels.
<b>Cervix:</b>	(cer'-vix) The neck of the uterus, which protrudes into the vagina, and that has a small opening (about the size of a pencil point), through which menstrual fluid escapes.
<b>Chromosome:</b>	(kro'-mo-som) A structure in the nucleus of a cell that transmits genetic information.
<b>Circumcision:</b>	(sur-kum-si'shun) Surgical removal of all or part of the foreskin of the penis.
<b>Clitoris:</b>	(klit'o-ris) A small sensitive organ of erectile tissue located above the opening to the vagina, which responds to stimulation.
<b>Corpus Luteum:</b>	(kor-pus lu'ti-um) A small yellow structure that develops within a ruptured ovarian follicle, and secretes progesterone.
<b>Dysmenorrhea:</b>	(dis-men-o-re'a) Painful menstruation; cramps.
<b>Ejaculation:</b>	(e-jak-u-la'shun) Forceful sending out of seminal fluid from the penis.
<b>Embryo:</b>	(em'bri-o) A name given to a fertilized ovum, from the second through the eighth week of development.
<b>Endocrine gland:</b>	(en'do-krin) An organ that manufactures hormones and sends them out into the bloodstream.
<b>Endometrium:</b>	(en-do-me'-tri-um) The mucous membrane lining the inner surface of the uterus.
<b>Epididymis:</b>	(ep-i-did'-i-mis) A coiled tube through which sperm exit the testes.
<b>Erectile tissue:</b>	(e-rek'til) Spongy tissue containing many blood vessels; it becomes rigid and erect when filled with blood.
<b>Erection:</b>	(e-rek'shun) Hardening of the penis
<b>Estrogen:</b>	(es'tro-gen) Female sex hormone produced by the ovaries.

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<b>Excretory system:</b>	(eks'kre-tor-e) Organs that eliminate waste from the body.
<b>Fallopian tubes:</b>	(fa-lo'pi-an) Tubes that convey the female sex cell (egg, or ovum) from the ovary to the uterus.
<b>Fertilization:</b>	(fer-til-iz-a'-shun) Union of the ovum (female egg) with the sperm (male sex cell).
<b>Fetus:</b>	(fe'tus) An infant developing in the uterus, from the third month to birth.
<b>Flaccid:</b>	The relaxed state of the penis.
<b>Follicle Stimulating Hormone:</b>	(foll'i-kel)The pituitary hormone that stimulates development of ovarian follicles.
<b>Follicle:</b>	(foll'i-kel)A sphere-shaped structure in the ovary, made up of an immature egg and a surrounding layer of cells.
<b>Foreskin:</b>	Loose skin covering the end of the penis.
<b>Genitals:</b>	(gen'it-als) Reproductive organs.
<b>Glans:</b>	The end, or head, of the penis.
<b>Graafian follicle:</b>	(graf'-e-an foll'i-kel) A nearly mature ovum, or egg, contained in a layer of cells, which ruptures when ovulation takes place.
<b>Growth spurt:</b>	A rapid increase in height and weight, which typically occurs during puberty.
<b>Heredity:</b>	The passing on of characteristics from parent to child.
<b>Hormones:</b>	Special chemicals secreted by endocrine glands, which cause changes in specific areas of the body.
<b>Hymen:</b>	A fold of flexible membrane that partially covers the vaginal opening.
<b>Hypothalamus:</b>	(hi-po-thal'(a)-mus) A part of in the brain that, among other functions, secretes chemicals that controls the activity of the pituitary gland.
<b>Labia (majora and minora):</b>	(la'bi'a ma-jor'ra, mi-nor'a) Two folds of fatty tissue that lie on either side of, and partially cover, the vaginal opening.
<b>Leukorrhea:</b>	(lu'ko-ri-a) A thick whitish vaginal discharge.
<b>Luteinizing Hormone:</b>	(lu'ten-i-zing) Pituitary hormone that stimulates estrogen secretion, ovulation, and formation of the corpus luteum.
<b>Membrane:</b>	A thin, soft, pliable layer of body tissue.

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<b>Menarche:</b>	(men'ark) The first menstrual period.
<b>Menopause:</b>	(men'o-pawz) The stage at which menstrual activity ends.
<b>Menstrual Cycle:</b>	The period of time measured from the beginning of menstruation (a period), through the series of regularly occurring changes in the ovaries and uterus, until the beginning of the next menstrual period.
<b>Menstruation:</b>	(men-stru-a'-shun) The monthly discharge of blood and cells from the lining of the uterus.
<b>Nocturnal Emission:</b>	(nok-turn'al e-mi'shun) The passing of semen from the urethra during sleep; a wet dream.
<b>Nucleus:</b>	(nu'kle-us) The part of a cell that controls its functions and that holds the genetic material.
<b>Ovary:</b>	(o'va-re) One of a pair of female reproductive glands, which hold and develop eggs and produce estrogen and progesterone.
<b>Ovulation:</b>	(ov-u-la'-shun) The periodic release of a mature egg from an ovary.
<b>Ovum:</b>	(o'vum) A female sex cell, or egg. (Plural: ova)
<b>Penis:</b>	The male reproductive organ involved in sexual intercourse and elimination of urine.
<b>Pituitary Gland:</b>	(pi-too'i-ta-re) An endocrine gland attached to the base of the brain, which secretes hormones.
<b>Placenta:</b>	(pla-sen'ta) The spongy structure that develops in the uterus during pregnancy, through which the fetus derives nourishment.
<b>Pregnancy:</b>	The condition of carrying a developing embryo in the uterus.
<b>Premenstrual Syndrome:</b>	(pre-men'stru-al) Symptoms such as tension, anxiety, breast tenderness, and bloating, which begin several days prior to the onset of menstruation, and subside when menstruation begins.
<b>Progesterone:</b>	(pro'jes-ter-one) A hormone that is involved with the menstrual cycle and pregnancy.
<b>Prostaglandins:</b>	(pros'ta-glan-dinz) A group of chemicals produced in the uterus, which tend to stimulate contractions and may cause cramps.
<b>Prostate gland:</b>	(pros'tat) A gland near the male bladder and urethra, which secretes a thin fluid that is part of semen.
<b>Puberty:</b>	(pyu'ber-te) The period of life during which an individual becomes capable of reproduction.
<b>Pubic hair:</b>	Hair over the pubic bone, which appears at the onset of sexual maturity.
<b>Reproduction:</b>	The process of conceiving and bearing children.
<b>Scrotum:</b>	(skro'tum) The pouch of skin behind the penis that holds the testes.

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<b>Secretion:</b>	(se-kre'shun) The process by which glands release certain materials into the bloodstream.
<b>Semen:</b>	(se'men) A thick fluid, containing a mixture of glandular secretions and sperm cells, that is discharged from the penis during ejaculation.
<b>Seminal vesicle:</b>	(sem'i-nal ves'i-kel) One of two glands located behind the male bladder, which secrete a fluid that forms part of semen.
<b>Sexual Intercourse:</b>	The erect penis of the male entering the vagina of the female.
<b>Sperm:</b>	Mature male sex cell.
<b>Staphylococcus aureus bacteria:</b>	(staf(y)-lo-kok'us aw're-us) The type of germ believed to cause Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).
<b>Testis (Testicle):</b>	(tes'tis; tes'tik-el) One of two male reproductive glands, which produce sperm and the hormone testosterone. (Plural: testes)
<b>Testosterone:</b>	(tes-tos'ter-on) A male sex hormone, which causes the development of secondary sexual characteristics.
<b>Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS):</b>	A rare, but potentially serious disease that has been associated with tampon use. TSS is believed to be caused by toxin-producing strains of the Staphylococcus aureus bacterium. The warning signs of TSS are: a sudden fever of 102° F or more, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle aches, a rash that looks like sunburn, dizziness and fainting, or near fainting, when standing up.
<b>Toxin:</b>	A poisonous substance that may be produced by bacteria.
<b>Umbilical cord:</b>	(um-bil'-ik-el) The attachment connecting the fetus with the placenta.
<b>Urethra:</b>	(u-re'-thra) A canal that carries urine from the bladder to the urinary opening. In males, the urethra is also the passageway for semen.
<b>Urination:</b>	The act of eliminating urine, liquid waste, from the body.
<b>Uterus:</b>	(U-ter-us) The small, hollow muscular female organ where the embryo and fetus is held and nourished, from the time the egg is implanted until the birth of the fetus.
<b>Vagina:</b>	(va-jí'na) The canal that forms the passageway from the uterus to the outside of the body.
<b>Vaginal Discharge:</b>	A normal white or yellowish fluid (leukorrhea) from the cervical canal or vagina.
<b>Vas deferens:</b>	(vas def'e-renz) A thin tube that transports sperm from the testis to the urethra.
<b>Virgin:</b>	A person who has not had sexual intercourse.
<b>Vulva:</b>	(vul'va) The external female genitalia, including the labia, clitoris, and vaginal opening.
<b>Zygote:</b>	(zi'got) A cell produced by the union of a sperm and egg.

brain functioning. Fields notes that teachers do so in part to protect themselves from charges of inappropriate teaching. Yet, ironically, parents who teach and encourage their children to use these terms may be deemed suspect, as potential child sex abusers, precisely because their children are equipped with this knowledge.

Although I was outraged by respondents' stories of being reported to CPS, after interviewing Charles, I became aware that I too held an entrenched belief that parents should not view their children as sexual beings. During his interview, Charles (50, White, lower middle class) described his 14-year-old daughter's blossoming young body as "entertaining." My initial reaction to this comment was one of shock and disgust and I left the interview feeling remarkably disquieted. In line with dominant cultural assumptions, I construed Charles' indication of an awareness of his daughter's attractiveness as a sign of possible child sexual abuse (Angelides 2004). It was only in reflection that I saw that I was equating this father's recognition of his daughter's burgeoning body and sexuality with perversion and possible abuse rather than a celebration of her development as an attractive young woman. Hence, another aspect of the culture of sexual fear is that parents who acknowledge their children's sexuality or whose children speak knowledgeably about sex may face societal condemnation. Just as parents may be uneasy about seeing their children as sexual beings, others in society may be uneasy about parents acknowledging and/or celebrating their children's sexuality.

But also, the parents I interviewed experience their children as active conspirators in their own asexualization. The parents' narratives indicate that they encounter a great

deal of resistance from their children when they try to talk about sexuality, suggesting that family sex talks should be viewed as relational and emotionally dynamic interactions. Parents feel shut out by their teenagers: They described children who react with dismay and anger when they raise the topic of sexuality, downplay the extent to which they need information about sex, and say they have learned all they need to know in school. In addition, family sex talks appear to conjure up not only teenage sexuality, but also parental sexuality. It may require both parents *and* their children to see one another as sexual, something my study suggests may be difficult to achieve in a culture characterized by sexual fear and shame (Irvine 2002; Levine 2002; Stein 2006).

Age and gender dynamics also seem to shape parent-child conversations about sexuality. Many parents experience their teenagers as drawing away from them in early adolescence and spoke of the tensions that ensue. They described how this compounds the difficulties they already have in talking about sex. Mothers, in particular, say their teenage sons actively pull away from them. One mother described her 16-year-old son as “standoffish” (Beth, 39, White, upper middle class). Mothers may respond to their sons’ pulling away by giving them more space and not pushing them to talk about sexuality. Those who are married or in long-term heterosexual relationships say they defer to their husband/partner when it comes to discussing sexuality with their sons. Single mothers, particularly those whose children’s fathers are not actively involved, do not have this option. Many spoke poignantly about the difficulties of broaching the subject of sex with their sons. Some single mothers say they feel intimidated by their sons’ hostile reaction to their attempts to talk about sex. In general, the mothers I interviewed expressed a

sense of being devalued and discredited by their children, sons in particular (Schur 1984). Some respond by leaving their sons alone. Thus, through assertions of masculinity, masculine power and dominance, in particular, these sons accrue independence (Connell 1995; Messner 2007). By contrast, mothers say they are more comfortable pushing their daughters to engage in sexual discussions, although many say their daughters also resist these talks.

In sum, for a number of reasons – structural, psychological, and cultural – parents are uneasy seeing their teenagers as sexual and talking about sexuality with their children and, apparently, the feeling is mutual. This matters because, although early calls for sex education were predicated on the notion that parents are unfit to teach their children about sexuality, since the 1980s, official government doctrine has posited parents as their children's best sex educators. For example, abstinence-only sex education is often described as a form of sex education that increases parents' rights: those parents who do not wish for their children to learn about contraception have the right for their children to receive abstinence-only education; those who do want their children to receive this information have the right to provide it themselves or to take their children to their family doctor or a clinic, such as Planned Parenthood, to receive this information. However, my research suggests that it may be difficult for many parents to see their children as sexual subjects and to talk to them about sex. In addition, most research that examines what parents say to their children about sexuality assumes a one-way conversation, with parents teaching their children about sex as their children absorb these lessons. This study suggests a much more complicated picture. When parents talk (or don't) to their

children about sex, they are not alone in the room (or the car) – a prevalent culture of sexual shame and fear is present, along with structural inequalities based on gender and age, among others. In particular, gender dynamics appear to play an important role in family sex talks, with mothers experiencing sons as especially defensive and unreceptive to discussions about sexuality and giving them more independence as a result. As we will see in the next chapter, however, regardless of their child's gender, parents who talk to their children about sexuality tend to emphasize danger and negative consequences and engage in tactics of surveillance and protectionism. The following chapter also explores how parents' understandings of and lessons about sexuality reflect and reinforce social inequality.



## CHAPTER 3

### LESSONS IN SEXUALITY, LESSONS IN DANGER AND INEQUALITY

As the previous chapter reveals, the parents I interviewed do not think of their own children as sexual subjects. I have suggested that they rely on their understandings of their teenagers as young, naïve, immature, and economically dependent in making this judgment. They also depict teen sexuality in largely fear-based terms and indicate an understanding of teen sexual activity as deviant. In addition, they experience their children as active in their own asexualization. Yet, we also saw that parents tend to think of other people's children, their children's peers, as highly sexual and sexualized.

In this chapter, I continue to explore this asexual/sexual binary and the parental strategies it engenders. In doing so, I examine how and why parents' understandings and guidance of teen sexuality reflect binary thinking. My focus is on how society defines what is normal, acceptable sexual expression, and how these norms build on and contribute to social inequalities. In particular, I focus on how these understandings reproduce gender, race, class, and sexual inequalities. In doing so, I am influenced by scholars of social inequality who urge us to look at how categories of difference are created and the consequences of these categories for the reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu 1984; Collins 2000; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Schwalbe 2008).

Within the major axes of inequality in the U.S. – race, class, gender, and sexuality – there are numerous categories that define difference: Black/White, rich/poor,

male/female, and gay/straight, for example. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to this categorizing of difference as binary thinking and points out that, in binary thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms, as being the opposite: for example, the opposite sex. But as well, binaries do not simply define what is different; they imply relationships of superiority and inferiority. That is, one side of the binary is culturally devalued. Men and women are not simply seen as opposites; historically, masculinity has been constructed as superior to femininity. Thus binaries provide ideological justification for social inequality. If one group is better than others, they deserve social rewards, to be on top. In this chapter, I explore the numerous binaries parents expressed that shape their understandings about their children's sexuality.

This chapter also examines how the asexual/sexual binary that parents articulate, coupled with dominant understandings of adolescence and adolescent sexuality, shape the strategies parents adopt to manage teen sexuality. As we will see, whereas parents view their children as asexual, this view competes with a discourse of adolescent sexuality as out-of-control and fueled by raging hormones (Schalet 2000, 2004). In addition, although parents describe their own teenagers as young and immature, running parallel to this notion is a dominant understanding of teenagers in general as “getting older younger” (Palladino 1996, xi) and an increase in media coverage that exaggerates and distorts child and teenage crime and violent and irresponsible behavior (Glassner 1999). These discourses are accompanied by heightened concerns about child sexual abuse and sex predators (Angelides 2004; Irvine 2002; Levine 2002). Hence, parents frame their children as victims, vulnerable to sexual predation and abuse at the hands of adults

(Angelides 2004; Irvine 2002), but also exposed to sexual risk in their friendships, dating relationships, and peer groups. To keep their children safe, parents engage in strategies of protection and surveillance. Yet, as I show in this chapter, parents' social locations, in particular economic inequality, shape the resources parents have to enact protectionist strategies.

#### “They’re Like Raring to Go:” Raging Hormones and Irresponsible Teenagers

One major binary that parents articulated that shapes their understandings of adolescent sexuality is a binary between adult and adolescent sexuality. In line with popular understandings of adolescence, many of the parents I interviewed depict teenagers as irresponsible vessels of raging hormones, depictions that, I argue, constitute “controlling images” of teens. According to Collins (2000, 2004), controlling images are hegemonic ideologies and images that depict “faulty” aspects of marginalized, oppressed groups. Controlling images are fundamental to legitimizing and maintaining inequality in America. For example, media representations of young Black men as thugs direct “attention away from social policies that deny Black youth education and jobs” (Collins 2004, 159). These controlling images also incite fear in many Americans, bolstering racism through the belief that racial integration of poor and working-class Black youth is dangerous (Collins 2004). Similarly, as we will see, controlling images of teenagers as immature, irresponsible, and controlled by their hormones serve to promote the belief that young people need protection from themselves and from other teenagers and cannot be trusted with sexual knowledge and citizenship.

Despite viewing their own children as asexual, the notions that sex is “a natural libido yearning to break free of social constraint” (Rubin 1984, 276) and that teenagers, in general, ooze sexuality and sexual desire were common throughout my interviews with parents. For example, some parents worry that if their children have sex, they may experience not only negative consequences (i.e., pregnancy, STD, emotional turmoil), they may “give in” or succumb to the pleasures of sex and damage their futures in the process. In this sense, sex is like an addictive drug that threatens to become all encompassing and supersede other interests. Sandra (45, White, upper middle class), who has 15- and 17-year-old sons, is concerned that her 17-year-old, who is a senior and preparing to go off to college in a few months, might “break loose when he discovers it [sex].” Sandra worries that if her son experiences sex in college he may lose his way; sex may consume him and prevent him from making good decisions, both about contraceptive use and his studies. She reflects that it would have been nice if he had had a girlfriend in high school while she was still around to remind him to use contraception and to monitor his grades: “I almost wish that he would have had a girlfriend by now, before he goes off to college, but again I have got to cut that rope and let him explore that idea.”

This notion of sexuality as an asocial drive and of teenagers as particularly vulnerable to succumbing to its siren call is also a dominant belief in U.S. society. At the Texas State Board of Education meetings I attended to observe community debates over the adoption of new student health textbooks, one speaker after another described teenagers as potentially sexually hedonistic and in need of social control. Where they

differed was on how best to control teenage sexuality, with some advocating information on contraception and others advocating abstinence-only sex education. One speaker, in decrying the abstinence-only position, compared a teenage body to “a shiny red sports car sitting in the driveway. Do you tell them they can’t drive it ‘til they’re married? No! They’re going to want to drive that car.” Similarly, Mr. M, the abstinence-only sex educator asked a class of high school students at Eastside, “When we think about sex, do we think of positive or negative things?” Without hesitation he answered his own question, “Positive, right? Positives are easy to think about. We don’t need to think about those. [In this class], I want you to think about the negatives. The outcomes of sex – how can it affect your life?”

The assumption of this discourse of adolescent sexuality is that young people know all about the good things that accompany sex, what is important is that they realize all the bad things that come with sex. For these parents, educators, and community activists, the goal of sex education is to teach young people to delay sexual activity until they are either married (abstinence-only) or are responsible enough to manage the overwhelming risks of sex (comprehensive and abstinence-based). Young people do not need to be educated in the pleasures of sex. Indeed, like the speaker at the school board meeting, who described a teenage body as akin to “a shiny red sports car,” some parents think teenagers *in particular* are able to achieve sexual pleasure because of their teenage bodies and hormones. Corina (39, Black, working class), for example, says, “[Teenagers] got their cute little bodies and their raging hormones. They’re like raring to go.”

According to Judith Levine (2002, 27), at the same time that Western culture framed young people as innocent and desireless, “it constructed a new ideal of the sexually desirable object.” the innocent child (see also Kincaid 1998). Indeed, in advertising and elsewhere, youthful bodies are often portrayed as the cultural epitome of sexiness, reflecting, Levine (2002, 27) argues, adults’ “erotic attraction to children.” If Levine is right, then children are not simply innocent and asexual; there is something profoundly erotic about that innocence and asexuality that may magnify adults’ fears about adolescent sexuality. Take, for example, Sylvia (44, Latina, lower middle class) and her husband’s reaction below. Sylvia’s 15-year-old daughter has told her parents about a friend of hers whose boyfriend sleeps over occasionally. Sylvia describes the conversation:

My oldest has a friend that has a boyfriend [who lives] out of town and he will come over and spend the night at their house. They’re in separate rooms. And she’s asked me what I thought about that and I said, “Absolutely not! No, no, no, no.” I mean, even my husband chimed in. I think he said something like, “It’s like putting candy in front of a kid and saying, don’t lick it or don’t eat it” (laughs). So, it’s just no.

Just as young children cannot be trusted with candy, Sylvia and her husband believe that teenagers cannot be trusted with their bodies. Thus, young people should be educated to fear their bodily desires because following their urges *will* lead to emotional and physical pain and suffering. As Sandra (45, White, upper middle class) puts it, [sex education should] just scare them to death (laughs)!....There are diseases that will kill you. They

will kill you.” Melissa (43, White, upper middle class) has a “zero tolerance policy – no alcohol, no drugs, no sex.” She keeps her four children “on a very short leash. I mean, you’re dealing with *life and death* issues from seventh grade on.”

That some parents describe teen sexuality in terms of raging hormones may seem to contradict my argument that parents do not consider their own children sexual beings. However, when these parents use the discourse of raging hormones they either tie it to their children’s peers, as Sylvia does above, or, when used in connection with their own children, they describe behaviors as entirely hormonally driven, eliding their children’s potential or actual sexual desire. Josephina (31, Latina, lower middle class), for example, who was a teenage mother, describes sex to her son as largely instinctual and motivated by hormones:

I explained that [sex] it’s very risky, in the sense that you are driven. A lot of your behavior is driven by your hormones. It’s not that you are good or bad or you do this because you consciously want to do it and *decide* to do it, there’s a lot of instinctive behavior and it’s driven by your hormones. And it can drive you to very dangerous situations in which you can end up having AIDS or an unwanted pregnancy, which was [what] happened to me...I think I was lucky, in a way, because I got pregnant, I didn’t get AIDS, which is a horrible disease and there is nothing you can do about it.

Josephina’s tactics are shaped by her own experiences as a teenager. As a teen, Josephina’s mother provided her with factual information about sex, but never spoke about how Josephina might feel:

My mother was considered a little bit liberal for her background and she explained all the technical, biological processes of reproduction to me, but that was about it. I was never told, you will feel this when someone touches you. When someone approaches and kisses you, you will feel *all* these things. And you will end, probably, in having sex. Because it's just something so strong at that age. And there is a lot of guilt associated with having sex at a young age in my culture. So of course I had sex! But I never told my parents because I felt guilty about it. And every time I did it, I cried and it was just tragedy...it was...it was very hard. And I didn't want that to happen to [my son]. I really want him to feel in control of his body and making responsible decisions so no unwanted consequences will come out of that.

Josephina says that sexual feelings are often missing from parents' discussions about sex with their children. She wants her son to know about these feelings so that he does not feel guilty, as she did when she had sex as a teenager. But she worries that even this information will not prevent him from getting carried away and believes that, once in the moment, it is difficult for young people to make any kind of informed decision about sex. Paradoxically, her use of the discourse of raging hormones may make it difficult for her son to develop sexual agency and responsibility: he cannot be responsible, based on this discourse, because his hormones are doing the thinking for him. Despite Josephina's earnest hope that her son feels in control of his body, much of what she tells him about sexuality suggests that he is out of control (or cannot be in control).



Like Josephina, many of the parents I interviewed have difficulty conceiving of responsible adolescent sexual activity – the phrase itself is an oxymoron for them – in large part because they regard teenagers as irresponsible. As we saw in chapter 2, many parents view their children as immature. An auxiliary part of this construction is that teenagers are, by their very youth and nature, irresponsible. This was a particularly prevalent understanding amongst the middle class parents I interviewed. Sylvia (44, Latina, lower middle class), for example, wants her 14- and 15-year-old daughters to wait to have sex until they are at least in college. I probed, “Do you think they might get more pleasure out of sex if they waited?”

*Sylvia:* No.

*Sinikka:* Until they’re more comfortable with their bodies, more knowledgeable about their bodies?

*Sylvia:* I don’t know if it’s about pleasure. I think they would be more responsible rather than being a teen (laughs)!

*Sinikka:* So in your opinion teenagers aren’t responsible (laughs)?

*Sylvia:* Yes (laughing)! What teenager is responsible?

Because a great deal of research documents the absence of pleasure in discourses of adolescent sexuality (Fields forthcoming; Fine 1988; Fine & McClelland 2006), as above, I often asked parents if their concerns about their children having sex in adolescence had anything to do with the amount of pleasure to be gained. Sylvia’s response typifies the answer I received: Most of the parents expressed the belief that teenagers can achieve sexual pleasure; it is learning how to refrain from sex or to safely and responsibly

navigate the risks of sex that is hard. Hence, pleasure constitutes one of parents' "evaded lessons" about sexuality (Fields forthcoming).

Parents' conviction that their teenagers are irresponsible is shaped by their experiences of their children being irresponsible – many parents shared stories of teens acting in irresponsible ways – but current scientific, "expert" discourse also promotes this belief. During the course of my fieldwork, I attended five Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings featuring invited guest speakers at Hayden Middle School. A popular topic at many of these meetings was recent research suggesting that young people do not yet have the ability to regulate their impulses. At one PTA meeting, the invited guest speaker was a doctor who specializes in adolescent medicine. The gist of his incendiarily titled talk, "Adolescence: The brain, the body, the beast," was that parents need to act as their teenagers' prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that regulates emotions and moods and provides intuition and morality. According to the speaker, this is one of the last areas of the brain to mature. Thus, until young people develop the capacity to control impulsive behavior, parents must stand between them and their poor choices.

This type of research suggests a huge divide between the behavior of adults and children. Children are impulsive, irrational, and emotional; adults are cautious, rational, and in control of their emotions. Many of the parents at the meeting appeared to wholeheartedly embrace this message. They spoke poignantly during the question and answer portion of the talk of how the speaker's depiction of adolescence resonated with their own experiences raising a teenager and their own memories of teenagehood. The

parents I interviewed put forth a similar binary understanding of adulthood as a time of maturity and rationality and adolescence as characterized by irrationality.

Yet, clearly, adults too are capable of engaging in impulsive, irrational behavior. One need only glance at a newsstand or tune into one of a number of television programs to see adults behaving irresponsibly. This binary between adult and child behavior suggests a wide gulf between grown ups and teenagers that does not capture the complexities of everyday life. It is also historically and culturally specific. As social historians have chronicled, the notion of adolescence as a discrete stage in the life course, nestled between childhood and adulthood, is a relatively recent one (Irvine 2002; Levine 2002; Luker 1996; Palladino 1996). The term adolescence itself was not coined until 1904 by the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall and was accompanied by a flurry of scientific “evidence” to bolster the notion of adolescence as a time when young people are neither physically nor developmentally suited for many adult responsibilities, including working, marrying, and bearing children (Luker 1996). This body of scientific research formed the backdrop for mandatory high school attendance, at least in urban areas, beginning in the 1930s (Palladino 1996). Understandings of adolescence are also culturally bounded. For example, in her study of Dutch and American parents’ beliefs about teenagers and teenage sexuality, Schalet (2000, 2004) found markedly different notions of adolescence. Whereas the American parents viewed adolescents as largely hormonally driven, unrestrained, and out of control, the Dutch parents constructed teenagers as mature young adults capable of self-regulation.

Although today, the notion of adolescence as a distinct stage in the life course is widely embraced in the U.S., scientific studies continue to refine the definition of adolescence and, in doing so, reify it. For example, a recent article by the New York Times' Personal Health columnist Jane E. Brody, described scientific research into teenagers' perceptions of risk (Brody 2007). This research concludes that teenagers do not have the experience or practice to accurately assess a situation and determine the best course of action, as adults do, and advises parents, teachers, and others who work with adolescents to train young people to recognize cues in the environment that signal possible danger (Brody 2007). However, as Brody reports, this research finds that younger teenagers (although the term "younger teenagers" is never age-defined in the article) do not learn as well from this approach and instead need to be closely supervised to be safe. Brody concludes:

Young teenagers need to be protected from themselves by removing opportunities for risk-taking – for example, by filling their time with positive activities and protecting them from risky situations that are likely to be tempting or that require "behavior inhibition." A young teenage girl should not be left alone in the house with her boyfriend, and responsible adults should be omnipresent and alcohol absent when teenagers have parties (Brody 2007, D7).

A question left unanswered in the article is why "young teenagers" do not respond well to a practice-based approach to decision making. Perhaps young teenagers do not respond well to this approach precisely because they have not had the practice and experience researchers say are necessary to draw conclusions about the consequences of their

actions. Ultimately, then, the advice to protect young teenagers “from themselves” may prevent young people from developing the experience they need to make informed decisions. Just as the discourse of raging hormones may prevent young people from developing sexual responsibility, this broader discourse of adolescence may hinder young people’s decision-making ability.

Along with representing a culturally and historically specific notion of adolescence, this quote also reveals heteronormative and gendered assumptions about sexuality: teenage relationships are heterosexual, boys are sexual predators, and girls’ sexual innocence needs protecting. It also places the onus for young people’s safety squarely on parents’ shoulders. As the examples reinforce, it is up to parents to engage their young teenagers in “positive activities” and protect them from “risky situations.” Brody’s use of the term, “responsible adult,” is also illuminating. In an article that dichotomizes adults as responsible and teenagers as irresponsible, it alerts us to the fallacy of this binary – that irresponsibility is not simply the terrain of adolescents. As we will see in the following section, parents are highly fearful about the sexual dangers adults pose to their children.

#### “It Can be Anybody:” Expanding the Stranger Danger Discourse

Along with teenagers needing protection from themselves, the parents I interviewed expressed a strong understanding that young people need protection from a broad array of adults. For example, Beatrice, (52, White, lower middle class) in speaking of the difference between her upbringing and her 16-year-old daughter’s, raised the issue of child sex predators:

One of the really major differences between my childhood and [my daughter's], we didn't have to worry about sexual predators or being snatched, kidnapped. We played outside all the time and there weren't any mothers around watching and all that. And I just know that, for me, that was a *major* thing when she was little. I mean, I never heard of sexual abuse, really, when I was a kid.

Beatrice suggests not simply that she did not know about sexual predators when she was young, but that sexual predators were not an issue. This hearkens back to a safer, more peaceful time when children were allowed to play outside unsupervised without fear of being snatched or molested. By contrast, Beatrice explains that, when her daughter was younger, she never allowed her to play outside unsupervised, as Beatrice did when she was a child. Instead, Beatrice organized and monitored all of her daughter's playdates. She also described sexual abuse to her daughter and continues to caution her: "if you're in a group you're safer." Even today, Beatrice keeps close tabs on her 16-year-old daughter's whereabouts and friendships.

Although predators undoubtedly existed in Beatrice's youth, Beatrice grew up in an era characterized by less knowledge and concern about child sex abuse (Angelides 2004; Cavanagh 2007; Irvine 2002). From Catholic priest sex abuse scandals to public sex offender registries to online stings with police officers posing as 13-year-olds to capture pedophiles to, more recently, a spate of allegations of teachers having sex with their students, today's parents, by contrast, are assaulted with a barrage of information and images about sex offenders and child sex abuse (Angelides 2004; Glassner 1999). In addition, in line with efforts over the past few decades by feminists, child protection

lobbyists, and others to expose the “myth of stranger danger” (Angelides 2004, 141) – that is, to promulgate the notion that acquaintances and/or family members are more likely to perpetrate sexual assaults than strangers – parents’ understandings of the dangers their children may encounter extend far beyond a discourse of stranger danger. Parents see sexual danger toward their children coming not only from strangers on the streets, but also from neighbors, from family members, and even from their children’s peers and intimate relationships.

According to Janice Irvine (2002, 135), the efforts over the last few decades to raise awareness about the dangers children face, sexual or otherwise, “had the ancillary effect of contributing to a cultural climate in which abuse seemed to lurk around every corner.” Indeed, many of the parents I interviewed have broadly embraced the discourse of sexual danger to the point that they treat the behavior of predators as natural and inevitable. Anyone is a potential abuser. For example, as a child, Lorena (32, Latina, working class), was molested by her babysitter’s husband and, later, his grandson. She has not explicitly told her 16- and 9-year-old sons about the abuse, but she has told them that “the reason they’re not allowed to spend the night at anybody’s houses is because bad things can happen.” Lorena does not want to tell her sons about her own abuse, saying it is too personal and she does not “know what they’d do with that information.”

Similarly, Sheila (48, White, lower middle class), who was “inappropriately touched” by one of her uncles when she was a child, has not told her 16-year-old daughter about her own experience, but has instead more generally warned her daughter away from adult males:

I had to start talking to [my daughter] early, to make sure that she understood that sometimes stranger danger isn't always strangers. Sometimes danger comes within a family too and you have to be careful. At six I told her, from now on, no sitting on any guy's lap unless it's Dad's. Dad's lap is okay, but no other man can hold you in his lap. And I would have to go and get her away, distract her from my uncle and stuff like that. So, we had to tell her stuff like that from the very beginning – that all people are not what they seem to be and even though something will feel real innocent to you, it might be feeling different to somebody else and that's disgusting (laughs).

Sheila regrets having to introduce her daughter to such adult concerns early on because she feels it has severely eroded her daughter's trust in adults. She says her daughter is uncomfortable around and distrustful of adult men in general. Although Sheila's lessons, like Lorena's, stem from a very painful personal experience, she does not want to talk about her own experience and instead paints a broad picture of potential abusers. Although clearly a heartfelt attempt to protect her daughter, rather than helping her daughter develop skills that might help her distinguish good from bad sexual encounters, Sheila's lessons to her daughter suggest a world of good and bad where good is asexual and bad is sexual.

But it is not simply young people who are not equipped with these skills. Some parents revealed that they too lack the ability to distinguish good from bad when it comes to sex. For example, based on what she has heard on the news, Ellena (41, Latina,



working class) believes that anyone might be a potential child sex offender, including her current boyfriend, from whom she is in the process of separating:

It can be anybody. It can be a family member. You hear about this on the news all the time. I mean, just recently there was the stepfather, then there was the stepmother. All of this goes through my mind, so it makes me more skeptical about any other relationships for me. And even so, I'm afraid like with [my 16-year-old daughter], I think that, I don't know, I had that problem, even with my boyfriend, having to move in with my boyfriend, I still had that problem, that constant supervision. Always, okay, making sure, okay, he's here, he's not over there. Of all the things I've seen and heard, it's more of being more protective. Ellena doubts that she will get into another serious relationship once she leaves her boyfriend because she does not feel like she can truly trust a man around her 16-year-old daughter. She worries that her daughter is shy and quiet and might not speak out if Ellena's boyfriend "tried something against her." Instead, she keeps a close eye on her boyfriend when her daughter is around.

Hence, the discourse of "it can be anybody" does not provide parameters around which to gauge sexual danger: it comes from anywhere and everywhere. Several of the single mothers I interviewed say they have chosen to remain single in part because they want to focus on raising their children and do not have the time or energy for a relationship, but also because they are leery about introducing an adult male, whose sexual history and proclivities are unknown to them, into their family unit. A broad, it can be anybody, discourse of sexual danger may prevent young people, as well as adults,

from developing risk assessment skills and skills with which to rebuff unwanted sexual contact. In this discourse, anyone is a potential victimizer and everyone is vulnerable.

Characterizing teenagers as too irresponsible and sexuality as too dangerous and fraught for young people to engage in, may thus deny young people information about how to more safely navigate the risks of sex. It also dichotomizes sex as safe (and implicitly good) in adulthood and unsafe (and implicitly bad) in adolescence. This implies that once young people reach adulthood (or get married), they will have no difficulty achieving sexual happiness. Denise's story below suggests a more complicated picture.

#### Denise's Story

At a party recently, a criminologist friend whom I had not seen in a very long time asked me about my research. Upon telling her that I was studying sexuality education, she asserted: "The problem with sex ed is they focus on stranger danger. That's not where the predators are. Most of the time it's someone in the family who poses the danger. They need to teach kids that their bodies are their own. That *no one* can touch them without permission." As I thought about what my friend said, I reflected that this is exactly what one of the parents I interviewed, Denise, learned from her parents when she was growing up and has taught her own seven children. I provide Denise's story here to highlight the disconcerting aspects of these sexual lessons. Despite their focus on danger and adversarial heterosexual relationships, most parents in this study assume that their children will have no difficulty achieving sexual and relational

fulfillment in adulthood and/or marriage. Yet, this flies in the face of a great deal of evidence to the contrary and, as we will see, Denise's narrative suggests otherwise.

Denise is a 52-year-old Black mother of seven children, ranging in age from 31 to 13. She is a nurse and works fulltime. She lives in the home where she was raised, having moved there 12 years ago when she separated from her husband. Denise has made it very clear to her children that their bodies are their own and no one else's: "I tell my kids, 'If somebody touches you, holds you, or grabs at you inappropriately, you need to tell them, back off, this is my body. That's it. No whatever.'" She believes this has been a highly successful approach. She proudly told me that her four adult children, ranging in age from 21 to 31, all made it safely through adolescence without any unintended pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases. She is also proud of the fact that her three grandchildren were all conceived in marriage.

Denise thinks it is important that young people hear open and frank discussion about feelings and touching. She says this is not simply a crucial component of parent-child talks, but should also be a cornerstone of sex education and is upset that it is, in her opinion, left out of sex education: "They leave out the most important part. They don't tell them about touching. They go into detail with everything else but the touching. And the touching is what leads to sex!" With her own children, she explains, "We'll talk about how they feel. 'How does it feel when somebody touch you in certain places or when somebody holds you too close, or if somebody's holding you close, or somebody hugs you?' Those type of feelings."

Denise said this approach has empowered her children, especially her daughters, to own their bodies and feel agentic through them. For example, she told me about her 16-year-old daughter who spoke out in class when a male student touched her inappropriately: “A guy put his hand on her leg and she said he was coming up her leg, and she screamed out, ‘Get yo’ hand off my leg!’” Her daughter was reprimanded for disrupting class and was sent to the principal’s office where she defended her outburst. Denise recounts: “She explained to the principal that she had told this boy, don’t touch her no more, and he continued. And the only way to get the teacher’s attention was to yell. And that’s what I told her [to do].” Denise is proud that her daughter remembered her advice, stood her ground, and rebuffed the boy’s unwanted touching.

In another example, Denise’s 13-year-old daughter told her that an uncle’s hug had made her feel “nasty” and asked her mother to talk to him. In response, Denise validated her daughter’s feelings and spoke to both her sister and her brother-in-law, the uncle, about the incident:

I told my sister that I needed to talk to her about the way her husband was hugging my daughter. And she said, “Okay. You’ve told me how you feel, you need to tell him.” I said, “Just so there’s no hard feelings.” So, I did. He said he wasn’t aware that he had hugged her inappropriately but if that’s the way he made her feel, he wouldn’t hug her like that anymore.

Rather than downplay or chastise her daughter for her feelings, Denise took them seriously and followed through on her promise to speak to her brother-in-law about it. By consistently telling her children “nobody touches your body but you” and honoring

their feelings, Denise hopes to encourage her children to carve out spaces of bodily integrity and, potentially, sexual autonomy. But her narrative exposes problematic aspects of this approach.

In addition to her 16-year-old daughter's run-in at school and her 13-year-old daughter's discomfort over an uncle's hug, Denise provided a few other examples of how her children, and even grandchildren, have talked with her about their feelings about their bodies and being touched. All of her examples involved bad feelings – feeling uncomfortable or nasty – so I probed:

*Sinikka:* Have they ever talked to you about something that felt good?

*Denise:* (Long pause) No not really. I remember one time, we were trying to get [my 16-year-old] to use tampons instead of pads and that was the weirdest conversation we've ever had to have. Because all the girls were together.

*Sinikka:* Your daughters?

*Denise:* Yeah. And the older two were trying to tell her how to do it. [My 21-year-old daughter] even took her to the bathroom, gave her a mirror, and showed her how. And we could hear her screaming. She goes, "Oh Momma, it doesn't make me feel good. It's nasty, da-da-da." I said, "Okay, stop. If it doesn't make you feel good, if you think it's nasty, then you don't do it. You don't use the tampons. We won't go any further." And then we laughed about it and that was it. Finally, I guess about two months later, she learned how to use them and she came to me and she said, "Momma, I can use it on my own now and I don't need

any help.” I said, “How does it make you feel?” She said, “I’m okay after it’s in.” I said, “Okay.”

Denise respected her daughter’s feeling, that inserting a tampon was nasty, once again showing that she honors their feelings, yet I came to see that Denise’s children either do not experience or are not willing to talk to their mother about “positive” bodily and sexual feelings. Despite the open communication and constant information Denise provides, her children seem to fear their own bodies and fear their mother’s reaction to their bodily functions. In providing an example of how close knit her family is, Denise told me that when her now 16-year-old daughter was 12 she started her period but did not initially tell her mother. Instead she told her oldest sister, Denise’s 31-year-old daughter. Denise recalls this incident:

[My daughter] said, “Momma’s going to be mad at me.” And [my oldest daughter] said, “Why?” “There’s blood in my pants and I wasn’t doing nuthin’ . You know how Mommy is. And I swear I wasn’t doing anything. I didn’t.” So she said, “It’s okay. You just started your period.” She said, “Whew, I just knew Momma was going to say somethin’ bad.”

As we continued to talk, I began to understand that Denise experiences her own body in a fairly fraught way and does not have fond memories of her own sex life. Just as she has taught her children, her father, who was a Baptist minister, and her mother taught her that her body was her own and no one should touch it unless she wanted to be touched:

*Denise:* I can remember my wedding night. I told my husband if he touched me I was going to shoot him. He goes, “What’s wrong with you? That’s what getting married’s all about!” [I said], “Pshaw, not my body.”

*Sinikka:* How old were you?

*Denise:* I was 20.

*Sinikka:* And you were pretty adamant. Did you guys have sex?

*Denise:* Not that night! I packed my bag and came home (laughing)! And my brothers took me back the next day! It was awful! I was like, nuh uh. My brothers were hilarious. They told me, “No girl, nuh uh, you can’t come back here. You married. You got to stay with your husband and that’s part of life.” [I said], “Not my part! Somebody else’s got to do that part.” And I’ll never forget, my oldest brother said, “No, we can’t do that part for you, you have to do it. You can tell him that you’re not ready just yet. No, I’ll tell him.” I said, “Okay, you tell him.” And it’s like, he said [to my husband], “You have to start with the touching and the feelings first, ‘cause she ain’t going to let you touch her body. So you have to work your way up.” And, god, I bet you I didn’t have sex for a month after I got married.

Denise had dated her husband for two years prior to marrying him. Their dating relationship was chaste. Her parents kept a close watch on both of them and would regularly remind her: “Nobody is to touch your body if you don’t want him to.” She said on her wedding night, “I didn’t want [my husband] to [touch me]. That was that.”

Denise knew without a doubt what she was willing to do sexually (or, rather, not willing)

and stood her ground. She experienced this as a small victory. Particularly when, once she started having sex, she found very little pleasure in it, confirming her initial reaction. I asked her: “Once you started having sex, how did you feel?” She replied with a sigh of resignation, “It was okay. And seven kids later – huh!”

Denise’s children have asked her about her sexual relationship with their father. She has told them that of course they had sex, ““that’s how you got here. When parents have sex, children are born.”” Her children then asked her:

“Well, Momma, what was Daddy like?” I said, “A grizzly bear. Every time I sat on the bed, he woke up if he was asleep.” And they said, “Oh, you so bad (laughing)!” I said, “Well, he could be asleep and I would come in and he’d say, ‘What took you so long to go to bed?’ And I would say, ‘I was waiting ‘til you went to sleep.’” And they would just laugh. I mean it’s just – I didn’t hide that from them.

Denise has told her children that she and her ex-husband had an active sex life, but not because of her own desire. In fact, she tells them she attempted to avoid having sex by coming to bed late, hoping her husband would be asleep. She also clearly ties sex to reproduction. This seems to be a lesson her children have taken to heart. I asked Denise if she has dated in the 12 years since she and her husband separated. She replied, “No. Oh my [14-year-old] son says, ‘Now wait a minute, you can’t have no boyfriends.’ I said, ‘Shut up! I am grown.’ He goes, ‘Nah, because we can’t be raising no more babies (laughing)!”” I asked Denise if she thinks she might date in the future. She replied,



“Probably not. Nope. Because the only boyfriend I ever had was my husband and I married him and that was just it.”

Denise learned early in life that her body was sacred and not to be touched. She presents this as an empowering message – she controlled her own body. Yet, her story suggests that she has had difficulty gaining pleasure through her body. The control she experienced primarily involved fending off sexual interest, including her husbands’ and possibly her own. But as well, sex often led to pregnancy in Denise’s life: “I love every single one of my children, but did I plan to have them all? No (laughs).” Although religion clearly has played an important part in Denise’s life, she did not say that her religion prohibited the use of birth control and indeed has taught her own children how to use birth control. Perhaps despite being a nurse, Denise felt uncomfortable using birth control because it signaled intent to have sex. This is the explanation many teenagers give, teenage girls and those who have undergone abstinence-only sex education in particular, for not using contraception (Bearman and Bruckner 2001; Kaplan 1996; Martin 1996; Philips 2000).

In sum, the U.S. is a sex-saturated culture that sexualizes young people, sending them confusing messages about their bodies and sexuality. Many parents, like Denise and her parents, try to counter these messages by teaching young people how to establish and maintain clear sexual boundaries. The assumption behind this, of course, is that once a child has made it safely through adolescence without being sexually active, molested, or harmed in any way, he or she will be capable of achieving sexual autonomy and pleasure. However, this implies that adults are automatically capable of experiencing

sexual joy; that adults do not encounter their own difficulties in claiming a sexual self. Ultimately, this ignores the evidence that many adults encounter tremendous sexual struggles, some of which play out in their own lives, some of which are directed outward and harm others. Americans in general, young and old, do not handle sex very well (Luker 2006).

### Raced, Classed, Gendered, and Hypersexualized Peers

As we have seen, parents view a whole host of sexual dangers confronting their children. In this section I show that it is not simply adults, whether they are strangers, known sex offenders, or family abusers, that young people are taught to fear, it is also their peers. The dominant American discourse of adolescence as a time of irresponsibility, when young people cannot be held fully responsible for their actions, not only constructs a false binary between adult and child behavior, it is also selectively applied to young people and is accompanied by a discourse of young people as willfully bad. For example, since the 1980s, teenage defendants have increasingly been prosecuted in adult courts as adults (Ferguson 2000; Glassner 1996). Barry Glassner (1999, 68, emphasis in original) observes, “The misbelief that every child is in imminent risk of becoming a victim has as its corollary a still darker delusion: *Any kid might become a victimizer.*” Importantly, those young people deemed “unsalvageable” are often poor and Black and Latino (Ferguson 2000). Through her ethnographic study of an elementary school, Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) found, for example, that teachers and administrations at the school viewed African American boys’ behavior as insidious while ignoring or minimizing White boys’ similar conduct. Similarly, whereas the parents I

interviewed largely view their own children as asexual and innocent, they described their children's peers as highly sexual and sexualized, with race, class, and gender meanings often braiding through their descriptions.

I came to see that parents accomplish their own children's goodness and asexuality in part by contrasting it with their hedonistic peers. Many parents, for example, described their children's peers as "openly sexual" (Gina, 51, White, upper middle class) and "promiscuous" (Rosalia, 43, Latina, poor). Parents' understandings and depictions of their children's peers are often overlaid with race, class, and gender meanings, although rarely articulated as such. For instance, Kate (43, White, lower middle class) in talking about her fears for her 14-year-old son connects them to his friends who live in a poor neighborhood near her home. Kate and her son live on the edge of a trendy urban neighborhood, but "you only have to go a certain, just a few blocks, half a mile, and you're in a really bad neighborhood, the projects." These children attend school with her son and have become his friends:

He's hanging out with a bunch of kids that look really rough and they talk about gangs too, but I don't think they're old enough to be in gangs yet. But, I think it's actually a very glamorous thing to these kids. The rap stuff, and 50 Cent and all those guys. Grand Theft Auto – it's really glamorous.

As we saw in chapter 2, Kate describes her son as naïve and innocent and worries that he will be pushed into a situation, sexual or otherwise, for which he is not ready. Based on her description of her son and his peers, it is clear that Kate views her son's peers as a threat to his innocence. While Kate does not explicitly talk about the racial, ethnic, or

class backgrounds of her son's peers, her use of the terms "projects" and "gangs" evoke race and class meanings. So she racializes her son's friends and, when she talks about her son's sexuality, she directly ties her fears to these classed and racialized friends whom she sees as bad influences.

During my interviews with parents, I noticed that few talked openly about race or class, but instead used "code words" (Bettie 2003; Fields forthcoming), as Kate does above. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002), as it has become increasingly taboo in modern America to discuss race openly, forms of overt racism have been replaced with "the new racism." This is a colorblind racism that embraces certain aspects of, for example, Black or Latino culture (e.g., hip-hop music and fashion and Jennifer Lopez) while simultaneously casting Black and Latino culture as deficient and the ultimate source for the lower socioeconomic position of Blacks and Latinos relative to Whites and Asians in America. Colorblind racism offers a new form of "racetalk" marked by several characteristics, including the utilization of subtle, indirect code words to make racial references without having to use the standard vocabulary of race and the use of semantic strategies such as indirectness or displacement, so that the speaker can project an image of him/herself as tolerant rather than racist (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2002). Similarly, Americans commonly employ what Julie Bettie (2003, 48), citing Sherry Ortner (1991), refers to as a "class-blind discourse," in which "class is often expressed through categories of difference... 'gender, race, ethnic origin, and so forth.'" Bettie (2003, 49) argues that class is displaced in everyday talk: rather than speaking directly about class, class

categories are spoken about and popularly understood as differences in “success, money, values, intelligence, gender, race, ethnicity and...subcultural styles.”

Like Kate, Penny (52, White, lower middle class) employs code words in describing her sons’ school and peers. When Penny and her husband got married and started a family eighteen years ago, they made a decision that, despite the financial hardship, Penny would be a stay-at-home mother. They bought a house in a low-income neighborhood and have lived frugally these past eighteen years on Penny’s husband’s salary. Their 17- and 16-year-old sons attend Eastside High School, which Penny described as “one of the highest risk schools in the district.” Risk is commonly used as a racialized code word for economic disadvantage (Ferguson 2000; Fields forthcoming). Penny feels there is what she calls a “cultural difference” between her and her neighbors: “Education is very important to us and I don’t think it is for most of the families around here. It’s just a cultural difference, I guess.” Rather than allowing her sons the freedom to choose their own friends, Penny carefully monitors her sons’ friendships. If one of her sons asks to bring someone to the house, she asks: “‘How are his grades?’ If he says, ‘Not so great,’ I say, ‘Then I don’t think that’s the type of person you should be spending time with.’” I asked Penny how her sons respond to this request. She replied, “They agree. I think they know already.” Although not directly articulated in race- and class-based terms, Penny links her fears that her sons may be exposed to bad influences to the neighborhood in which they reside and the type of school they attend.

In this way and others, Kate and Penny project their anxieties for their children onto raced, classed, and (as we will see) gendered Others. This othering of their peers

serves to preserve their notions of their own children as asexual and innocent. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) observes, in binary thinking, one side of the binary relies on reference to its opposite for meaning. But as well, binaries are relational; by referring to the Other, individuals define their place in the social landscape (Butler 1993; Collins 2000). Judith Butler (1993) argues, for example, that people accomplish gender through the constant invocation and repudiation of unacceptable others, what she refers to as “abject identities.” Collins (2000, 70) further notes, “the ‘Others’ of society...threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries.” Similarly, the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argued that societies divide the world into good and bad, pure and polluted as a way to establish moral order (see also Durkheim 1912 [2001]).

A long history of binary thinking around sexuality has shaped understandings of sexuality in U.S. society. As social historians have documented, the poor, new immigrants, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, gays and lesbians, and those deemed mentally “unfit” to reproduce historically bore the mantle of “bad” (i.e., promiscuous) sexuality (Luker 1996). Today, many of these sexual stereotypes endure and have become so entrenched that they are taken for granted. Collins (2000, 2004), for instance, argues that the persistent hypersexualization of Black men and women can be seen in policy makers’ and academics’ intense concern over and scrutiny of Black teenage motherhood (see also Kaplan 1996; Luker 1996). Similarly, as I discuss below, the parents I interviewed often

used racial, gender, and class signifiers in casting their children's peers as hypersexualized.

In contrast to previous research that suggests that parents stress sexual vulnerability to their daughters while giving their sons more leeway to explore their sexuality (e.g., Martin 1996), the parents I interviewed stress danger and vulnerability of both sons and daughters. This is similar to Schalet's (2000, 2004) finding in her study comparing middle-class White parents and their children in the U.S. and the Netherlands. Schalet found that not only do American parents stress sexual danger to their sons and daughters, American teenage boys believe that sex is risky regardless of how careful one is; that no amount of planning and contraceptives can save one from the dangers of sex. Like the American girls Schalet interviewed, these boys deeply fear the consequences of sex. Yet, as we saw in chapter 2, parents, specifically mothers, experience sons as highly resistant to family sex talks and seem to give boys more independence as a result. Thus, while most parents expressed the belief that sexuality is just as dangerous for boys as for girls, they may not have as frequent or as explicit conversations with their sons about their concerns as they do with their daughters. In other words, there may be a disjuncture between what parents think and what they do when it comes to their sons' sexuality.

Many of the parents in my study, similar to Schalet's study participants, expressed concerns about their children's past, present, and future dating experiences and warn their children away from the "opposite sex." Parents of sons see girls as potentially sexually dangerous and aggressive while parents of daughters describe boys in the same light. While these assumptions about their children's sexuality are heteronormative, by drawing

on these discourses parents cast heterosexual relationships in an extremely unfavorable light. Rose (43, White, upper middle class), who has three sons ranging from 13 to 8, regularly sits her 13-year-old son down to talk about puberty, dating, and sex. “[I tell him], ‘You need to watch out for girls.’ And, of course he’s not allowed to date yet, at his age. And he won’t be able to date ‘til he’s 16, but I want to start telling him now ‘cause I think a lot of times girls are more aggressive than boys are.” Despite being a woman herself, Rose warns her son away from girls. Like other mothers of sons I interviewed, she says girls mature faster than boys and often pressure boys to have sex to solidify a relationship.

This understanding is interesting because a great deal of research indicates otherwise. Studies find, for example, that girls often feel pressured to have sex before they are “ready” (Martin 1996; Phillips 2000). However, past research also suggests a compelling explanation for why and how parents can cast girls’ sexuality in such a negative light. Research shows that young women face a limited range of acceptable behaviors when it comes to sexuality. If they violate the cultural construction of girls as naturally less interested in sex than boys, they risk being labeled sluts (Martin 1996; Phillips 2000; Tanenbaum 1999). Young women constantly skirt the Madonna/whore dichotomy: either they are sexually innocent Madonnas or sexually lascivious whores. As more young women have sought sexual pleasure and agency, many adults have responded with alarm, underscoring the tremendous anxiety about female sexuality that persists in the United States (Wilkins 2004). Parents, hence, may rely on the Madonna/whore dichotomy in maintaining their own children’s sexual innocence. By



casting “other” girls as sexual temptresses, they maintain their understandings of their sons, and also their daughters, as asexual and innocent.

Importantly, parents’ depictions of girls as sexual temptresses often had race and class overtones. For example, Renae (43, Black, working class) tells her 19-year-old and 13-year-old sons to watch out for girls: “[I say], ‘You better stay away, stay away. Sometimes girls trap you.’” Indeed, last year her older son, Cameron, who was a senior in high school at the time, claimed that his girlfriend feigned a pregnancy, which, had it been true, Renae says, would have prevented Cameron from going away to college. Renae’s financial situation is modest, she is a teacher’s aide and her husband works in a door factory, but Cameron, a bright, focused student, had been awarded a full college scholarship. Renae insisted that Cameron accompany his girlfriend to Planned Parenthood where she took a pregnancy test that came back negative. Upon learning this, with his mother’s approval and insistence, Cameron broke up with the young woman.

Cameron is now a freshman in college and tells Renae that his ex-girlfriend’s pregnancy scare in high school ““really kind of woke me up to women. I’m scared of women.”” Renae is pleased that Cameron reports he is not dating and is focusing on his education, but she hopes that he will remain open to women in the future:

[I tell him], “Get your education. You going to meet a whole lot [of women] out there in different careers and different, well, attitudes and all that. Educated and everything. And on your level.” Because I didn’t feel [his ex-girlfriend] was on his level to be honest. She wasn’t on his level education-wise at all. She was

more streetwise. She didn't graduate. They were supposed to graduate at the same time and they didn't. She had to go to summer school to finish up.

Renae reveals that it is not all women Cameron should stay away from, just a certain kind of woman. Like other parents, Renae does not overtly talk about class, but instead uses code words like "streetwise" that have strong class overtones. In encouraging her son to find girlfriends who share his career aspirations and intellectual abilities, she is also encouraging him to find girlfriends who share his social class location (either current or potential).

Whereas the parents I interviewed cast girls as the aggressors in talking to their sons about sexuality, in discussing sexuality with their daughters parents consistently position their daughters' as victimized and vulnerable rather than desiring subjects – essentially, as Madonnas. In this discourse, boys are the sexual aggressors. Greg (43, White, lower middle class), who has two stepdaughters in addition to a biological daughter, tells his 18-year-old stepdaughter she is better off in a group than paired up with a boy:

If the news has something about date rape on it or these girls turn up missing or dead and, not that it only happens on dates, we're not telling her that, but it's like, there's safety in numbers. [I tell her], "If you're with a group of friends and you stay with a group of friends, there's less chance something's going to happen to you...If you're in a group you are better protected." And I just hope she honors that. So far, I think she has.

In addition to relying on the news and other sources of information, Greg bases his belief about predatory boys on his own experience as a male: “I feel like I have to protect my girls. You know, I was a guy and I want to protect my girls from that.” Yet, in protecting his daughters in this way, he effectively maintains their victim status.

The parents’ discussions with their daughters about dating and relationships paint a fairly gloomy picture. Many parents view relationships, in general, as a hindrance to their daughter’s well-being. Gabriela (44, Latina, upper middle class) tells her three daughters (ranging in age from 16 to 7): “Take care of yourself first, then seek out a relationship with someone else. Make sure that you’re taking care of yourself first. Be self-sufficient, have your own job, your own career, travel, have your own interests.” Some fear that even a responsible, trustworthy daughter might be lured in over her head by a boyfriend (most parents assume that their children are heterosexual) who is less focused, less responsible, and more sexually driven.

Some parents feel this way because their daughters have expressed regrets about being pushed by a boyfriend into doing something for which they were not ready. For example, Shawna’s (45, Black, lower middle class) now 20-year-old daughter had sex as a teenager because, she said, the boy she was with pressured her: “Does she regret it? Yes. She’s over it, but she’s very, very cautious. Very, very cautious. She hasn’t had a boyfriend [since]. She’s just like ‘I don’t even want the pressure. I don’t want a boyfriend.’” In addition to avoiding the sexual pressures that go with dating, Shawna also states that her daughter does not need the time and emotional pressures that accompany dating: “Like I said, she’s in college. She needs to concentrate on some

things right now. She got in a little bit of academic trouble so she needs to concentrate on that.” However, Shawna’s strategies, like Greg’s, may serve to reify her daughter’s victim status.

As with sons, parents’ depictions of their daughters’ potential dating relationships often reproduce not just gender inequality but also race and class inequality. For example, Beatrice (52, White, lower middle class), whose 16-year-old daughter attends Taylor High School, where Whites are a demographic minority, says she will allow her daughter to date whomever she chooses without showing her disapproval because she thinks “it’s important to explore.” However, Beatrice says she would feel some disapproval if her daughter chose to date a Black or Latino boy. She explains:

Boys I think at this age don’t have a lot of social skills, meet the parents kind of thing. And, I don’t know, just from my observation, that may be especially true for Hispanic and Black boys – just they have a different family background or cultural reference. I mean, I have thought of that and I would not discourage her or anything. I would try to encourage her to talk to me about it.

Beatrice stereotypes Black and Latino boys as lacking the social skills other boys have, thereby perpetuating racist assumptions about Black and Latino boys. Even though she says she would not discourage her daughter from dating a Black or Latino boy, in saying she would want to talk to her daughter about it, she suggests that she may introduce her concerns (and stereotypes) to her daughter.

Similarly, Sheila (48, White, lower middle class) says her 16-year-old daughter, who attends Eastside High, a school with a predominantly Black and Latino student body, is only attracted to Black boys:

*Shelia:* She *never* has had a White boyfriend. Never. It's always been Black guys. Always...Even if we're driving down the street, she does not *ever* do a double take on a White guy. Always on a Black guy. Always, always.

*Sinikka:* Have you asked her why?

*Sheila:* She likes their bodies. Physically they just seem to her to have more – she's more attracted to the muscle. And I keep telling her, "That's okay, at this point in your life, to be obsessed with that, but to think that that's a good long term thing (laughs)?" Because, like I said, their value system, she does not embrace. But she likes the music. She likes the look. And last year, if she answered her cell phone, you could not tell that she was not Black, she went full into the dialect.

The way Sheila describes her daughter's attraction to Black boys' bodies may reflect the extent to which African American men and boys are regarded and depicted as hypersexual and hypermasculine in the U.S. (Collins 2004; Ross 1998). Sheila says she does not mind that her daughter is only attracted to Black boys, but indicates that she thinks it is just a phase. Moreover, she emphasized to me several times that her daughter "does *not* embrace their cultural values as a whole," implying that Blacks have different (and inferior) cultural values compared to Whites. She has also "cautioned her about some of the guys that have come over. There's been a few guys that have come over

[that I didn't like]. Some of them I just adore and I tell her, 'He is a cutie.' I don't care what color they are if they're decent and they've got a good value system. That's really what it breaks down to." Like Beatrice, Sheila stereotypes Black boys, but suggests that her concerns are not about race. Instead she employs racetalk, using code words, such as "cultural values," to talk about race while describing herself as colorblind.

Sheila then told me about one Black boy who apparently exposed himself to her daughter two years ago, when her daughter was 14. Her decision to tell me this story suggests she wanted me to see that her worries about Black boys are not unfounded. But the story also exposes the particular dilemmas parents face and how their interpretations are shaped by race, gender, and current understandings of adolescent sexuality. The boy and her daughter were standing in the yard talking when Sheila's husband, who was watching them from a window, saw the boy "acting suspicious." Her husband bolted out of the house and ran the "kid off our property." Their daughter admitted that he had exposed himself to her and that it was "gross." In response, Sheila's husband "sat out in our driveway in the back of our van for two nights with a rifle in his hand (laughs)." This occurred over Christmas break and Sheila and her husband tried to get their daughter transferred to another school for the following semester:

[We] couldn't get her in the school where we could get her back and forth in time and stuff. So she had to go back to the school. And we really contemplated calling her school and telling them what had happened. Or calling the police that night. But she would only tell us his first name, she wouldn't tell us his last name.

Would Sheila and her husband have responded in a similar manner if the sex of the teenagers in this story had been reversed; that is, if a girl had exposed herself to their son? Would they have had a similar response if the boy in the story had been White? It is difficult to know for sure. However, it seems as though sexual and racial politics and discourse shaped their reaction. Female sexuality is often associated with (and may be experienced as) vulnerability and victimization (Martin 1996; Phillips 2000), while the sexuality of Black boys and men has historically been framed as excessively dangerous and out of control (Collins 2004; Pascoe 2007). Sheila's and her husband's attempt to transfer their daughter to another school implies she could not be safe near this boy. Their daughter's unwillingness to divulge the boy's last name, however, suggests some resistance on her part to her parents' efforts to characterize her as a victim.

During each interview, I asked parents how they would feel about their children dating someone who did not share their racial or ethnic background. Although most parents said they would allow their children to date someone of a different race/ethnicity than their own, some said they would prefer their children do not. Many stressed that their preference stems not from their own prejudice but from societal prejudice, arguing that interracial relationships make life more difficult for people because of the way interracial couples are viewed in society. Similarly, many parents told me they would prefer that their children are straight. Although these parents say they will accept and love their children "no matter what," they stress that life would be much easier for their children if they are heterosexual and "stick to what they know. That is one of those things that you just really hope that everything in their life goes happily and joyfully"

(Kelly, 37, White, working class). Indeed, overall parents told me their biggest wish for their children is their future happiness. Yet, by tying their future happiness to same-race and opposite-sex relationships, parents reproduce racist and heteronormative cultural logics.

So parents often construct their children's peers as "abject" Others (Butler 1993; Pascoe 2007). This understanding is inflected with racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. In doing so, they maintain their own children's innocence and goodness and differentness from their peers. But this also means that they view their children as potential victims in all aspects of their lives. Based on this equation, their children's peers are not fellow innocents on a path of mutual self-discovery and pleasure. Instead, peers are potential predators, abusers, and entrappers. As we will see, much of how parents manage their children's sexuality is informed by this understanding.

#### Parental Strategies: Protection and Surveillance

Discourses do not simply articulate particular worldviews; they also guide people's actions (Foucault 1978; Irvine 2002). They form the foundations upon which people act and interact. For example, based on her understanding of adolescent sexuality (as well as other aspects of adolescence) as a "life and death" issue, Melissa (43, White, upper middle class) tells her four children: "I trust you, but if you slip off in the sense that you say you're somewhere where you're not, then you will be checked on every two hours. So, I'll trust you and then we'll see. If you step off the track, then you can count on a lot of checking in and less trust." Melissa carefully monitors her children's activities and has, she says, gained a reputation among their friends as a hard-nosed



parent: “I’m known as the strict mom,” she wryly commented. Melissa reads her children’s emails, their text messages, and their Internet history. She regularly checks their MySpace sites as well as their friends’ sites. She is always up when they come home at curfew and quizzes them on where they have been and what they have been doing. In order to maintain this vigilance, she is up past midnight and begins each day “at five, four-thirty or five every morning.” Indeed, when I interviewed Melissa, she seemed frenetically busy. She met me in the parking lot of a coffee shop, inviting me to hop into her SUV. Before she could sit down with me, she explained, we first had to drop a child off at football practice. She also cut our interview short because she had to take her youngest child to a scheduled appointment.

I was reminded, after interviewing Melissa, of Lareau’s (2003) study of families of fourth graders. Like Melissa, the middle-class families Lareau studied had hectic lives. In between work and school, these parents ferried their children to and from their numerous organized activities, including sports practice and events, dance and music lessons, and tutoring. According to Lareau, organized activities represent an important way that middle-class parents cultivate their children’s talents. The parents I interviewed expressed the belief that extracurricular activities not only help to cultivate their children’s talents, but also keep their teenagers safe by ensuring they are in controlled environments and surrounded by “positive” peer groups. They also keep teens from being bored, something all the parents in this study believe encourages “experimentation,” sexual or otherwise.

However, the middle-class parents in this study have greater resources to draw on in occupying their children. Many casually described their children's numerous organized activities. Kim (45, Black, lower middle class), whose 17-year-old son is heavily involved in dance, describes her 12-year-old niece's and 10-year-old daughter's weekly schedule:

On Mondays and Thursdays we go to tutoring. And that's been happening for the last, say, two years. [My daughter] goes to dance Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Acting on Wednesdays and Saturday mornings. Choir and voice lessons on Sunday. I mean, it's just, everything is set.

Many of the working class and poor parents I interviewed also encourage their children's participation in extracurricular activities, but rely on activities that are tied to their children's schools, and even then, they say it is difficult to purchase the required equipment. Kelly's (37, White, working class) 16- and 14-year-old sons ride the bus to and from school everyday and are expected to be home when they are not in school or in transit until Kelly gets home from work. The exception is when they have basketball practice or when one of their coaches, whom Kelly describes as completely devoted to their players, calls: "[Their coach] will call up some of the kids sometimes, 'Hey we're getting together at the middle school and we're going to have a scrimmage.' Or whatever. Stuff like that, that keeps these guys in focus with having a social kind of atmosphere." Kelly is thankful that her sons have such caring, involved coaches. She reflects on the importance of basketball in her sons' lives:

I don't know what all the other people do, if they go bowling or what they do, but my kids do basketball...When they go on the Internet, they look up shoes, basketball shoes. I have even gone to the history and looked to see what they look up. They look up shoes.

However, Kelly says, her tight budget makes it difficult for her to purchase the shoes her sons desire. "When they say, 'Mom, why can't we go out and buy me some new basketball shoes?' I say, 'Let me look at my bankbook. Let me see how much I have. Sorry dudes. It's either food or shoes.'"

Similarly, Corina (39, Black, working class) firmly believes in the importance of extracurricular activities but said that when she was a single mother she often found it difficult to buy track shoes for her two older daughters, who are now in their twenties. She recently told her daughters that she sometimes had sex with men for money in order to support her daughters' activities: "I'm not saying that I sold myself but hey, if I had to do it for my girls, yeah. And not putting them in any danger. I didn't bring no men to my house." I asked her how her daughters' responded to this piece of information:

They didn't believe me. It was like, "Mom, you're kidding. You was always with us. You ain't had time to do stuff like that." I said, "Well you got those tennis shoes, didn't you? Or you went to that track meet that I couldn't afford to get you to, I got you there." You know. Sacrifice.

Like other parents, Corina views her daughters' participation in organized activities when they were teenagers as an important part of their development and a way to keep them safe; however, she could not take for granted the ability to purchase the equipment and

entrance fees required for their participation. Instead, this required, as she put it, “sacrifice” on her part.

Thus, despite their shared belief in the need to protect their children, parents’ social locations, in particular, economic inequality, shape the resources they have with which to enact protection strategies. As we saw above, middle-class parents have access to a range of supervised extracurricular activities they hope will keep their children safe. In addition, the more affluent parents in my study describe using and providing their children with tools and technology to keep track of their whereabouts and thereby protect them. By contrast, lower income parents told me how they literally use their bodies to safeguard their teenagers. I delineate these strategies below and discuss their consequences for both parents’ and teenagers’ well-being.

Many middle-class parents discussed the importance of their children having their own cell phones so that parents can monitor their whereabouts. Beatrice (52, White, lower middle class) got her 16-year-old daughter a cell phone in sixth grade so that she could “keep up with her and stuff. And sometimes I get mad if I call it and it’s on voicemail or whatever. I’m like, ‘You should have this phone on!’” However, since cell phones are mobile and do not indicate the user’s location, Beth (39, White, upper middle class) and her husband have adopted other technologies to keep track of her 16-year-old son: “He has to call me from place to place. And then has to prove that he is there. Like calling me from a house or something so I can see it on caller ID.” In addition to paying for her son to have a cell phone, Beth has the financial wherewithal to own a phone with a caller ID display and to pay the monthly phone charge for this service so that she has

visible proof of her son's whereabouts. Although none of the affluent parents I interviewed described using Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) technology to track their children, there is some evidence of the growing popularity of these products, particularly in high-end vehicles, and many retailers market these products to parents as a way to keep their teenagers safe by monitoring their activities and locations (see, for example, <http://www.mobileteengps.com/>).

Some of the middle-class parents I interviewed are torn about how far to go to protect their children. Portia's (46, Latina, upper middle class) husband wants their 16-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter to learn how to be resourceful and self-sufficient. They both have summer jobs and are supposed to save their money to pay for things throughout the year. In order to reinforce the message of self-sufficiency, Portia's husband does not want Portia to help them out when they run low on money. Portia frets:

My view is that things are very different because when we grew up, you could spend a thousand dollars on a car and it —. I was in a small town, so if my car broke down, it wasn't that big a deal. There really weren't any bad parts of town and a relative could come help me. We don't have relatives. We're out here on our own...So I want him to have a reliable vehicle. I want him to have enough money for fuel so that he doesn't run out of gas and enough money to make sure that he eats enough. That does take money!

Portia points to the social structural phenomenon that, she believes, makes the world a more dangerous place for her children than it was for her: they live in a big, diverse city and they do not have relatives nearby to watch out for them. As far as she is concerned,

as parents, she and her husband are responsible for their children's safety. Thus, although Portia's husband would like them to be more resourceful, Portia uses her economic assets in the hopes of protecting them and buffering them from danger. She has insisted on buying her son a new vehicle on the basis that it will be more reliable and safer than a used one. She also pays for her children to each have a cell phone and reminds them constantly to keep the phones charged. Further, against her husband's wishes, she secretly gives her son additional money to pay for gas, food, and other incidentals.

Lower income parents also think that the best way to keep their children safe is to closely monitor their whereabouts, however, they have different resources with which to do this. Rather than using and equipping their children with technology, working class and poor parents describe using their own physical presence, whenever possible, to ensure their children's safety. For example, like Portia, Charlene (37, Black, poor) feels like she stands between her children and a very scary world. However, Charlene currently lives in the kind of neighborhood Portia fears her children might drive through:

Like, where I stay, it's like a lot of Hispanic guys and a lot of them look like, I don't know, I ain't going to even say, but them are mainly the ones that are chasing them little girls or they're telling them something. They'll be like, "Hey, say little momma." And when I'm with [my daughters I tell these men], "Keep your eyes over there because you're not going to go to jail 'cause they're underage, *I'm* going because I'm going to whoop your tail!" So I have to be the protector of my girls, you know what I'm saying?

Charlene does not own a car, thus her 17- and 15-year-old daughters must walk, for example, to the bus stop or to their part-time jobs. Charlene tries to make a point of personally walking with them, placing herself between the men in the neighborhood who whistle and catcall and her daughters (whom she describes as very attractive). She does this at what seems to be an enormous cost to her own well-being. For example, despite having to get up very early to get her children off to school and go to work, Charlene often stays up until past midnight or, if she is asleep gets up, so that she can escort her 17-year-old daughter home from her part-time job at a nearby fast-food restaurant. As Charlene puts it, “I’m by myself raising them, taking care of them. And sometimes it get stressful. It get hard. But I can’t concentrate on that. I just have to keep my eyes open. I tell them to watch their surroundings.” Charlene teaches her daughters to monitor their surroundings, but she also literally uses her body to shield them from danger.

Charlene’s story also shows how parents’ vigilance, as a privatized solution to the discourse of sexual danger, has different consequences for young people depending on social class. Because Charlene is on her own and has no one else upon whom to rely for support and/or to watch out for her children, she often has to make difficult parenting decisions based on her belief that she must maintain vigilance to keep her children safe. For example, Charlene made the decision that her 15-year-old daughter would repeat ninth grade rather than have her walk to the bus stop alone to attend summer school.

When her daughter failed ninth grade, in keeping with her vow to not allow her children to walk in her neighborhood alone, Charlene got up every weekday morning at six a.m. to walk her to the bus stop so that she could attend summer school. But then

Charlene landed a temporary job at a computer warehouse. As part of the job requirement, she occasionally had to be at work at five a.m. At first, Charlene would go in late or miss days at work to get her daughter to summer school, but she was eventually told she was in danger of losing her job unless she started showing up regularly. Saddled with a student loan from the one-year vocational business school program she recently completed, Charlene was in no position to bargain with her employer and face the potential loss of a job. So, as she put it, “I canceled summer school. So [my daughter] had to repeat. She did. Yeah. And she was upset about it, but she got over it.”

Charlene believes that a good mother is one who protects her children. During her interview, she mentioned her role as her children’s protector frequently: “I have to be the protector of my girls, you know what I’m saying?” Yet, as a single parent with no immediate family nearby, she is also her children’s sole economic support. Her decision was undoubtedly also shaped by welfare reform. In 1996, welfare was radically altered. Along with other changes, mandatory work requirements and a five-year lifetime limit on benefits were instituted, effectively redefining what it means to be a good mother, at least if one is poor (Ehrenreich 2001; Hays 2003). To be a good low-income mother today is to be a working mother. The realities of Charlene’s life mean that, in order for her to maintain her status as her children’s protector *and* the family breadwinner, she saw no other option but for her daughter to drop out of summer school.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the asexual/sexual and the adolescent/adult binaries evoked by parents shape their understandings of and strategies of control over



adolescent sexuality. Table 3 lists the binaries the parents articulated between their own children and their children's peers and between childhood and adulthood. The discourses of teenagers as irresponsible, irrationally controlled by hormones, and vulnerable to numerous sexual dangers have become so entrenched in U.S. society, they appear to have achieved the status of a common-sense truth. As such, I suggest they constitute "controlling images" of teenagers. They serve to promote the belief that young people need protecting from themselves, from a whole host of sexual dangers, and from gendered, racialized, and classed hypersexualized Others. "The very enormity of controlling adolescent sexual behavior leads adults to defend against the risk of transgression by stressing young people's responsibility – or irresponsibility" (Nathanson 1991, 176).

These discourses also divide the adult world from the realm of childhood and adolescence, suggesting that, when it comes to sexuality, age represents an important axis of social inequality. Through their binary thinking, parents imply a wide gulf between adult and teen sexuality. According to this binary: Sex between consenting adults is automatically good. Sex between teenagers can be good (and may be especially good because teenage bodies are culturally viewed as paragons of sexiness), but is fraught with danger. Sex between a teenager and an adult can only be bad.

As Schalet (2000, 2004) and others have observed, teen sex is a risky enterprise in the U.S. But adult sex can also be risky and unfulfilling, as Denise's story suggests. Characterizing sex as only risky during adolescence sets up a false binary. Similarly, there are numerous other risky activities in adolescence, as in life. For example, driving

Table 3. Binaries

<b>Asexual Child</b>	<b>Sexual Peers</b>
Naïve	Knowledgeable
Focused/Goal-oriented	Lack of focus
Passive/follower	Aggressive
Victimized	Predatory
<b>Adolescent</b>	<b>Adult</b>
Dependent	Autonomous
Impulsive	Rational
Irresponsible	Responsible
Immature	Mature

is risky. And whereas teenagers behind the wheel raise parental and societal alarm bells, fears about teens driving recklessly or getting into an accident do not seem to carry the same emotional intensity (and moral undertones) as fears about teen sexuality. Kelly (37, White, working class), for example, compared teaching her 16- and 14-year-old sons to drive to teaching them about sex: “I can teach them how to drive, but I can’t teach him how to – what they should know about sex.” I suspect Kelly may have been about to say “how to have sex,” but stopped herself, instead saying “what they should know about sex.” As we saw in chapter 2, parents think of sex as private and may feel exposed and shameful when discussing sex with their children. Like Kelly, some parents told me that because sex is private, it is beyond instruction. Similarly, the parents I interviewed who have experienced sex abuse in their past have not told their children about their own particular experience, rather they try to protect their children from similar experiences through vigilance and scare-tactics. This suggests that as long as sexual fear and shame

characterizes Americans' feelings about sexuality, young people, and, indeed, adults, will continue to be denied affirming information about their bodies and sexual desires.

However, social inequality also clearly plays an important role in parents' understandings of and attempts to control their teenagers' sexuality. In thinking about and talking to their children about sexuality, parents' beliefs are shaped by and contribute to race, class, gender, and sexual inequalities. Indeed, this chapter points to the importance of an intersectional analysis that includes sexuality, not simply as an afterthought, but as an integral aspect of how social inequality is produced and reproduced in society (Collins 2000). Through their binary thinking, parents contribute to the notion that teen sexuality is bad, hence, teens who have sex are bad and any negative consequences that befall them are their own fault (unless it's their own children, of course). For example, Beatrice (52, White, lower middle class), in talking to her 16-year-old daughter about a pregnant girl at her daughter's school, told her daughter, "She made a choice and her life's going to be harder because of that." So parents assign complete agency to other teens and complete victimization to their own children, ultimately justifying social inequalities and hierarchies.

Yet, why do the sexual binaries and hierarchies exist in the first place? Ultimately, I argue the sexual binaries serve to buttress social inequality by blaming parents and young people for teen sexual activity. Good parents maintain and protect their teenagers' sexual innocence. Bad parents have bad teenagers who have sex, with their behavior typically characterized as dangerous and out-of-control. This individualizes the problem and directs attention away from the cultural ideologies,

institutional arrangements, and social inequalities that structure family life. Hence, parent blame goes hand in hand with ethics and ideologies promoting individualism.

The U.S. is a nation that valorizes families and childrearing while simultaneously denying families access to affordable childcare, healthcare, quality education for all, safe neighborhoods, flexible and well-paid work, and hopeful futures for young people and, indeed, their parents. Many of the parents I interviewed are pessimistic: They worry that their children's lives will be hard. They see the options arrayed before their children as limited. Some middle class parents spoke dispiritedly of the extreme competition to get into college. Some working class parents described the limited options facing their children even with a high school diploma. Hence, parents are anxious about the ability of their children to secure a piece of the pie: They present their children as deserving, as worthy, by desexualizing them – by making them “good kids.” Thus while parents’ understandings of adolescent sexuality often serve to bolster social inequalities, they must be understood in the context of a larger society that is highly stratified and that presents a limited range of acceptable (and, indeed, viable) life trajectories.

Finally, this chapter has explored how, based on these dominant understandings of teen sexuality, parents practice surveillance and protection in their efforts to keep their children safe from sexual harm. As we have seen, this is a privatized solution to the problem of teen sexuality and sexual danger and, depending on their social class location, parents have different resources with which to enact protectionist strategies with different consequences for their children. Moreover, as Portia’s story in chapter two suggests, protectionist strategies are not foolproof. Portia (46, Latina, upper middle class) is

affluent and her children participate in a number of enrichment programs. In addition, Portia uses her formidable resources in an effort to buffer her children from harm. Yet, when Portia left her son for nine weeks in order to stay with her daughter at an eating disorder clinic in another city, her son had unprotected sex. In my opinion, then, there needs to be a radical reinvisioning of adolescent and childhood sexuality. The understandings of and strategies of control over teen sexuality that hold sway in U.S. society today deny teenagers full sexual citizenship. They construct false dichotomies of responsible and irresponsible, adult and child, sexual autonomy and sexual danger, and good and bad teenagers that deny young people a full range of sexual feelings and experiences and reproduce social inequalities. They may also prevent young people (and, it seems, some adults) from developing skills to discern good from bad when it comes to sexuality. This is a topic I will return to in the concluding chapter. In the next chapter, I explore the contradictions and ambivalence embedded in parents' efforts to make sense of and teach their children about sexuality while keeping their children safe.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEEN SEXUALITY AND PARENTAL AMBIVALENCE

Research on sex education tends to suggest that Americans hold polarized views on sex education and adolescent sexuality (Irvine 2002; Levine 2002; Luker 2006). Most recently, Luker's (2006) study of the battles over sex education finds that, when it comes to adolescent sexuality, Americans are divided into two groups: sexual liberals and sexual conservatives. According to Luker, sexual liberals and conservatives disagree on a fundamental level about tradition versus modernity, values, and the role of information in people's lives. For example, sexual liberals think there is no such thing as too much information about sexuality; that young people need plenty of information about sexuality in order to make good sexual choices. Sexual conservatives, in contrast, believe that too much sexual information can be confusing, at best, and dangerous, at worst, to young people (Luker 2006). In addition, sexual conservatives insist that equipping young people with knowledge about sexuality, including contraception, jeopardizes the institution of marriage: teaching about contraception, they argue, implies that sex is readily available outside of marriage, thereby removing a major incentive for young people to get married.

Yet, by focusing predominantly on activists and communities involved in fights over sex education, previous research depicts reality as "divided into people who are for or against someone or something" (Smelser 1998, 11). In this chapter, I argue that these

polarized positions do not accurately reflect the complexities of parental understandings and management of their children's sexuality. Instead, in line with recent research highlighting Americans' ambivalence about sexuality (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004, 2007; Regnerus 2007; Schalet 2004), I find that ambivalence and ambiguity characterize parents' discussions and understandings of their teenagers' sexuality.

Psychologically, ambivalence broadly refers to "the simultaneous existence of attraction and repulsion, of love and hate" (Smelser 1998, 5). Hence, psychologists tend to focus on individuals' contradictory states toward people, objects, or symbols. A more sociological understanding of ambivalence emphasizes that contradictory feelings or attitudes are often rooted in structured social relations (Smelser 1998; Willson, Shuey, Elder, and Wickrama 2006). Ambivalence, sociologically defined, is "the result of pressures imposed by contradictory demands or norms placed on an individual in a particular social location, role, or relationship" (Willson et al. 2006, 236). Hence, sociologists examine how social conditions give rise to and encourage ambivalence. Ambivalence tends to arise from interdependence, for example, and often entails a sense of obligation. Choice is restricted, "thus, dependence entails a certain entrapment" (Smelser 1998, 8). Not surprisingly, the parent-child relationship is rife with ambivalence (Smelser 1998; Willson et al. 2006).

In this chapter I explore parents' ambivalence about their children's sexuality and the social structures that contribute to it. In the first section of the chapter, I broadly examine the narratives of the parents I interviewed. In the second section, I explore in-depth the stories of two parents – Sharon and Scott. In addition to highlighting tension

and contradiction in parents' narratives, I explore how gender shapes parents' ambivalence, as well as their understandings of, and strategies of control over, their children's sexuality. I contend that it is important to examine parents' ambivalence for at least three reasons: 1) It brings complexity to the sex education debates by showing that the so-called divisions between sexual conservatives and sexual liberals are not as clear-cut as has been suggested. 2) It underscores how parents' social locations, beyond simply their political or moral beliefs, shape their understandings and management of adolescent sexuality. 3) It highlights ambivalence itself as a significant component of parents' feelings about their children's sexuality.

“It's Been a While Since I was Young, but I do Remember”

That many parents are conflicted about how to think about and talk to their children about sexuality is not surprising, given the contradictory messages about sexuality that dominate the cultural landscape. On the one hand, sex is vaunted as a key to personal fulfillment and happiness, important for self-development, and a powerful drive in life. On the other hand, sex is depicted as a risky enterprise, particularly for teenagers, and as immoral outside of the institution of marriage (Irvine 1994). Parents are caught between numerous competing discourses. As abstinence-only sex education has begun “to assert a kind of natural cultural authority, in schools and out” (Fine and McClelland 2006, 299), the discourse of teenagers as sexually driven and teen sexual activity as inevitable, increasingly competes with the discourse that abstinence is best – the moral *and* rational choice.



Reflecting a combination of these two dominant discourses, most of the parents I interviewed professed that sexual abstinence until marriage (or adulthood) is what they would prefer for their children, but also a belief that this is probably not realistic. Rose (43, White, upper middle class), who has three sons ranging in age from 13 to 8, encapsulates this stance when she says, “even though we’re Catholic and you’re not supposed to have sex ‘til you get married, I know, in reality, that’s probably not going to be the case. But I want – I hope it won’t be until he’s in his twenties.” Beth (39, White, upper middle class) discusses her ambivalence about telling her 16-year-old son he should remain abstinent until marriage:

*Beth:* I will say things like half-kiddingly, but he knows I’m not kidding, like “Now remember you *cannot* have sex until you’re married.” I just know that that’s not going to happen. I think the no-sex-until-marriage thing is a religious thing and we’re not that religious, so I do not have that expectation of him.

*Sinikka:* But you tell him anyway?

*Beth:* Yeah because you don’t know what else to say.

Although she is not very religious, Beth uses the language of abstinence-until-marriage in discussing sex with her son because, despite her belief that it is unrealistic and that her son will not abstain until he is married, she does not know what else to tell him. She lacks a cultural repertoire to talk about sex outside of marriage in a positive, affirming way.

As we saw in chapter 2, Beth has not talked with her son about contraception, finding it difficult to reconcile that discussion with her stance on abstinence-only, her

general discomfort, and her sense that her son is too young for this information.

However, many of the parents who stress abstinence also said they provide contraceptive information. Lorena (32, Latina, working class), for example, prefers that her 16-year-old son wait to have sex until he is married *or* until he has found the right person: “I always instill in him, ‘You have to have somebody special. It has to be somebody special. Hopefully it will be the person you marry. But these days I can’t expect that, but that’s what I prefer.’” Because she feels she cannot expect her son to abstain until marriage, Lorena has discussed contraception with him. However, when I asked her if she thought it was acceptable for teenagers to have sex, she responded, “I don’t know. I think it depends on the individual. But my son, no. I don’t think so.” Like many of the parents I interviewed, Lorena is torn between a belief that her teenage son may have sex (in part because sex is such a powerful force), and a desire that he wait.

I came to see that parents’ own experiences critically shape their understandings of adolescent sexuality and their ambivalence about what is best for their children. Corina’s (39, Black, working class) story provides insight into this dynamic. Corina has three daughters – two are in their twenties and are married and have children of their own. Her youngest is 14-years-old. When her two oldest daughters were in high school, Corina had them sign a contract promising to abstain from sex until marriage. If they graduated from high school without having had sex (measured by the absence of a teenage pregnancy), she pledged to give them each five hundred dollars.

To reinforce the abstinence message, she took them to witness a friend’s childbirth, what she calls “the childbirthing class,” so they could see for themselves,

“Look it hurts! This is what happens.” In addition, Corina was extremely vigilant. She never left her daughters’ sides:

I would go with them to the movies; I would go with them to the mall; I went to the dances; I was the chaperone at the prom (laughs)! I can just go on and on about all the little stuff I did. If there was a track meet, I was there. Everything they did, I did with them.

Corina also had several male friends talk to her daughters about the “male point of view.” One friend in particular, whom Corina described as “a player,” told her daughters “the truth, ‘I just want women for their body. I’m using them and if any other man tells you that’s not what they’re doing then they’re lying to you.’” Corina hoped that these talks would help her daughters realize the pitfalls, for women especially, of having sex outside of marriage.

Yet, in spite of her vigilance, the contract, the childbirthing class, and the talks Corina still provided her daughters with information about contraception, including taking them to Planned Parenthood. When I asked her why, she explained:

Because things happen, you know? I was a teenage girl. I snuck out the window. And I figured my girls will slip up and they’ll do something crazy too. So they need to know the right methods to take. [I tell them], “Make sure you use protection. You protect yourself. You protect him. You don’t want to get no disease. And if he’s out messing around then you’ll most likely catch something.” Plus, Planned Parenthood, they show videos. They talk to you. They teach you about contraceptives. They tell you about the venereal diseases,

what they all do to your body, how to prevent you from having children and everything else.

Corina desperately wanted her two oldest daughters to abstain from sex – to get through high school without an unplanned pregnancy or unwanted sexually transmitted disease and to have “something left to save for your husband on your wedding night” – yet, based on her own recollection and understanding of what it is like to be a teenager, especially a teenage girl, she decided it would be foolhardy to deny them information about contraception. In particular, Corina emphasized to her daughters that boys are not to be trusted; hence, they must be prepared to protect themselves.

Significantly, Corina was a teen parent. Her first daughter was born when she was 15, and, as she puts it, “By the time I was 17, I had two babies.” Her parents died when she was 14 and she was living with her grandmother when she got pregnant the first time:

I got away. My mother was dead; my grandmother couldn't chase me around, you know, so I had too much freedom. And I don't want my girls to do the same thing. And I always told my girls, I don't want them to be like me. I want them to be better than me.

To give her two oldest daughters the best chance in life, Corina did everything she could possibly think of to get them both through high school without having to suffer as she says she did, including talking to them about contraception, despite her earnest hope that they abstain. When they each graduated from high school, she gave them the promised five hundred dollars. She has one more daughter to get through high school. She plans

to get her 14-year-old to sign the abstinence contract this year. She is also organizing a childbirthing class, along with a trip to Planned Parenthood.

Thus, how parents experienced and remember their own adolescence and sexuality shape how they think about and manage their teenagers' sexuality. Some parents even wonder whether sexual abstinence is indeed the route to happiness it is so often chalked up to be. Sheila (48, White, lower middle class), who has two sons in their twenties and a 16-year-old daughter, articulated this uncertainty:

I will always discourage a teenager from having sex before marriage. Period. But really what I would want is that they wait to have sex until they're about 25 and figure out what they want first (laughs). If I could really say that and get away with it! But instead, I define it as wrong before marriage. I don't necessarily – with my own experience and my experience with my husband, I don't think our life would have been any better or worse if we had waited. It developed along the way. And you can wait until you get married and then hate the sex with the person you're with, even though you love them dearly.

Sheila and her husband of 28 years both had active sex lives as teenagers and were sexually active before they married. She does not think this harmed her in any way, yet, she would not feel comfortable saying this to her children. She expressed annoyance that her 16-year-old daughter's sex education class at school, "did the condom route," yet, as she continued to talk, it became clear that she has told her children to wait to have sex until marriage *or* adulthood. Below, she explains what she and her husband said to their daughter about her sex education class:

We interjected our own values and told [our daughter], “Well, this is what they’re going to be teaching you, here’s how we feel about it.” And my thought on that has always been, “I would prefer you wait ‘til you’re married. However, if you decide, *as an adult*, that you’re *not* going to do that, be careful. Take these precautions.”

Sheila and her husband have emphasized to all their children that they would like them to wait to have sex until they are married, with the caveat: if they decide, as adults, that they are ready to have sex, then they must use contraception. Yet, as Sheila continued to talk, she disclosed that she has also told her daughter that she will help her get on birth control if she decides she is going to have sex in high school:

I did tell her, “I don’t want to put you on the pill because I don’t want you to think, at 16, that I’ve given you permission. But, if you’re going to do that anyway, I’d rather have you on the pill than –.” Because at that point, I’m not going to talk her out of it. If she’s made up her mind, I’m not going to talk her out of it. And that’s why I say on that [background form] thing, I’m somewhat conservative – I would rather it be like that, but I also know the world we live in.

Yeah, it’s been a while since I was young, but I do remember.

Shelia considers herself somewhat conservative because she thinks abstinence is probably best, but, at the same time, she is pragmatic – as she reminded me, she was once young. Like many parents I interviewed, she relies on her own life experiences in making sense of her children’s sexuality. These experiences are often more nuanced than the sex education debates might suggest. Sheila had sex as a teen and still remembers how it felt.

She does not feel she was permanently scarred by her teenage sexual activity and, in fact, remembers it fondly. Nor does she believe her teenage sexual experiences have prevented her from having a fulfilling sex life as a married adult, as the abstinence-only position asserts.

It might seem obvious that a parent like Sheila who identifies as somewhat conservative would express ambivalence about her children's sexuality. Surprisingly, however, I found ambivalence even (and, in some cases, especially) present among parents who articulated strong convictions about politics, religion, sexual morality, and healthy sexuality. It is not simply that parents have a rigid set of convictions and understandings and doggedly stick to these. Instead, parents take their cues from their children and from their understandings of how society works in general.

In what follows, I draw from two interviews to further explore ambivalence and contradictions in parents' narratives. Following Ken Plummer (2004, 190), my goal is to use "deep stories" (akin to Clifford Geertz's "thick description") "to see more clearly that lives are not simply straightforward in their genders, bodies, sexualities, or relationships." One respondent is a mother of two teenage daughters who self defines as "very liberal" and works at the college level in health education and outreach. The other is a father of one teenage son and two younger sons who self defines as "very conservative" and an active Catholic "who follows the Church's teachings."

I have chosen to focus on these two cases in particular for a number of reasons. First, they both identify on the extreme ends of the political spectrum – one liberal, the other conservative – and they both expressed strong opinions about adolescent sexuality.

Hence, their stories bring insight into how parents with deeply held convictions about adolescent sexuality understand and guide their own children's sexuality. This builds on and complicates research that focuses solely on activists who are involved in the fights over sex education. Second, they share the same biological sex as their children. Mothers in my study tend to say they feel more competent and authoritative talking to their daughters about sexuality, whereas fathers say they are best equipped to talk to their sons. Hence, some parents may feel conflicted about their children's sexuality because they view it in a mystified fashion, as "other" than their own. I thus opted to focus on parents who share their children's biological sex in an effort to avoid confusing parental ambivalence with these other gender dynamics. Third, these two parents both have multiple children of the same sex and thus spoke exclusively about gender issues from one standpoint. This allowed me to further tease out how gender shapes parents' understandings of, and strategies of control over, their children's sexuality.

#### Sharon's Story

Sharon is a married, White, 51-year-old mother of two teenage daughters, ages 14 and 16. Her current income is \$56,000 and total household income is \$156,000, making Sharon one of the highest income parents I interviewed. She identifies as very liberal and has a post-college degree. A few years ago, Sharon declined a promotion and sought out a new job that would be less stressful and time-consuming so that she could spend more time with her family. This new job also allows her to put to use her expertise in sexuality research and education. Prior to her interview, Sharon explained that, in part because of



her job but also because of her upbringing, she is very knowledgeable about sex and feels comfortable talking to her daughters about sexuality.

Indeed, Sharon was very frank about sex in her interview. Whereas I typically had to warm parents up to the subject of sex by first talking very generally about their children and their daily schedules, Sharon introduced the subject in response to my first question – how would you describe your daughters?:

They're very different from one another, both physically and personality wise.

The older daughter, the 16-year-old, doesn't act out – other than mouthiness. But doesn't act out in any way that I'm aware of in terms of sexual involvement or sexual intercourse. But she may be sexually active, I don't know. We certainly talk about it.

Sharon not only raised the topic of sex early in her interview, but also reveals some of her ambivalence. In this description of her 16-year-old daughter, she refers to teenage sexual activity in terms of acting out, suggesting a conservative stance on teenage sexual activity. As we will see, however, Sharon wants to cultivate her daughters' sexual subjectivity – a sense of pleasure and agency in their bodies (Martin 1996) – and is convinced that teenage sexual activity is “unavoidable.”

Sharon grew up in a fairly liberal household. As a teenager in the 1960s, “there were still messages about not having sex until you got married and I never even listened to any of that crap and my parents certainly didn't shove that down my throat.” She was critical of a great deal of the information available about sex in the 1960s, describing it as

“condescending.” “They just assumed that you were heterosexual and assumed a whole lot of things. People didn’t talk about STDs.”

By contrast, Sharon tries to provide her daughters with diverse information about sexuality: “My kids, they don’t hear – if I have anything to do with it anyway – homogenous messages when it comes to sex and sexuality.” She specifically asked a close friend who is a lesbian to be her oldest daughter’s godparent because “I want to have homosexual adults in my child’s life so that if they grow up with that orientation, if that’s their way to express themselves sexually, that they don’t feel shunned or feel that that should be hidden or act out in self-destructive ways.”

Similarly, both she and her husband have made it clear that they do not expect their daughters to get married nor do they expect them to be heterosexual: “When the girls were little, when we talked about marriage we would say, ‘When you get older and if you *choose* to get married.’ We try to use [the word] partner. And every once in a while I say, ‘When you get older and you settle down with a girl or a guy.’” As Sharon explains it, “we’re not disgusting PC people at all. But we just want it to be safe for them.” She and her husband hope that their daughters feel safe to express their sexuality in a variety of ways. Moreover, they are openly affectionate in front of their daughters because, “[in a relationship], you need to enjoy each other physically and we do and I want them to see that. Sex isn’t this dirty thing you hide away, it’s part of life.”

Sharon is also pleased that her daughters are exposed to other happily married couples through her and her husband’s friends and members of their church, “they just have great role models...I think that I’m not seeing any kind of white trash influence on

them.” I asked Sharon what she meant by white trash. She explains: “Well, you know what I mean. When I say white trash...I mean, like fighting and fussing and screaming and bad divorces and battering. That sort of thing.” Indicating that class is as much about cultural as economic differences (Bettie 2003; Bourdieu 1984; Ortner 1991), Sharon explicitly distances her middle-class behaviors and attitudes from those of the lower classes. The lower classes, not the middle class, engage in domestic violence, “bad divorces,” and corrosive emotional interactions. Her use of class stereotypes constructs her own middle-class gender and sexual subjectivities “as enlightened and progressive” (Valocchi 2005, 765). By stating, “you know what I mean,” she also stresses that this belief is a kind of cultural logic – widely known, understood, and assumed to be common sense – and positions me as a fellow member of the enlightened middle class and thus someone who shares her worldview. Sharon suggests that, through her privileged class status and her daughters’ exposure to others who share a similar class standing, she can bestow important social resources, including “good” relationship skills, to her daughters.

Through all of these strategies and others, Sharon hopes her daughters develop a healthy sense of relationships and of their own sexuality. She also hopes to instill a sense of a right to sexual pleasure in her daughters. In her previous job as a health educator, Sharon traveled around the state giving talks about sexuality education: “I’d talk about, just say yes. That we need to educate young women to just say yes. So that they could say yes without all the come here, get away sort of stuff.” In other words, Sharon hopes to cultivate in her daughters what Karin Martin (1996, 2) refers to as “a positive sense of self and sexual subjectivity.”

Indeed, Sharon was among a minority of parents I talked to who has talked to her children about masturbation (and one of only a couple of parents who has talked to a daughter). Moreover, the handful of parents I interviewed who have talked to their children about masturbation typically did so after “catching” them masturbating. Their discussion thus focused on masturbation as something that may be enjoyable but must be done in private. Sharon, in contrast, has spoken to her daughters about masturbation as something explicitly pleasurable. Moreover, she openly explained how masturbation helped her find sexual pleasure: “We’ve talked, very lightheartedly, about masturbation. And I told them, ‘If I hadn’t done it, I don’t know how I would have enjoyed sex with somebody.’ [So we didn’t talk about] the specifics of it, just that it’s normal and that it might help out.” Sharon hopes these talks will encourage her daughters, if they have not already, to masturbate. Her goal is for them to learn about their bodies and what is sexually pleasurable now, rather than wait for the moment of intercourse to provide sexual fulfillment.

However, despite her sex-positive perspective, Sharon also spoke cogently of the dangers sexually active women (indeed, all women) face in a sexist society, particularly one that privileges male sexual agency. Hence, in talking to her daughters about sex, she tries to emphasize both their sexual agency and right to sexual pleasure *and* the difficulties that sexually active young women may encounter in a sexist society (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003; Vance 1984). As we will see, her struggle to balance sexual pleasure with sexual danger reveals what a complicated, difficult endeavor this is.

Sharon worries that, because they are young women, her daughters may be sexually victimized or pressured into being sexual when they are not really interested or ready. For example, she told me about talking to her daughters about oral sex. From what she has heard and seen on television, Sharon thinks that girls often participate in oral sex not for their own sexual pleasure, but because it is “the thing to do now. And if I truly felt that they were getting a lot of pleasure doing that, well, go. But that’s not what’s happening in the majority of those cases. I mean, it’s a statement or whatever.” Thus, she has stressed to her daughters the difference between “doing something that they want to do and something that they felt obligated or pressured into doing. And that only they can make decisions about what’s right for them and I’ll support them however they choose to do that. But I don’t want them to feel obligated or pressured.”

Sharon’s struggle to raise sexually agentic daughters reveals the double bind she faces. On the one hand, she wants her daughters to feel empowered to actively learn about and seek out sexual pleasure. On the other hand, she firmly believes that the society in which she and her daughters live often condemns girls who are sexually knowledgeable (or even alleged to be), that many girls feel removed from their own sense of themselves as sexual beings, and that girls and women are vulnerable to sexual violence. Her daughters, for example, have talked disparagingly about girls at school who are rumored to be sexually active: “You’ll hear them say just horrible things about other girls. Like, ‘She’s such a skank.’ ‘Well, what’s a skank?’ So we kind of talk about those things when they come up. ‘Oh god, she has a bad reputation.’ ‘What does that mean?’” Although Sharon encourages her daughters to question the sexual double

standard, she is also aware that it is a continuing dynamic in her daughters' lives – one that can potentially negatively impact them (all girls risk being labeled sluts and easy).

How does Sharon's desire that her daughters develop sexual agency coupled with her fear that it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for them to do so until they are older, influence how she thinks about their sexuality? She is highly conflicted about how and whether her daughters can exercise sexual autonomy and agency. For example, she found out from reading her oldest daughter's diary that she had given a boy a "hand job in the church van on the way to a ski trip." She expresses ambivalence about the incident:

If she was doing it because she wanted to and if she got something out of it, I guess I don't really have a problem with it. But if she feels like, she *has* to; I hope that's not what it is. I don't want her to feel like she's got to sexually service some boy in the back of the church van! I honestly don't think that's how she felt or I might have said something. I think she's got a good head on her shoulders when it comes to that.

She hopes that her daughter chose to explore and pleasure this young man, but is concerned that she may have felt pressured to "sexually service" him. In the end, she has not talked with her daughter about this incident. In part, because doing so would reveal that she has read her daughter's diary, something that might damage their relationship, but also because she has decided to frame the incident in terms of choice, not victimization.

Sharon's experiences and understandings suggest that how parents talk to and think about their children's sexuality is not as straightforward as the polarized liberal versus conservative sex education debate would suggest. Indeed, despite her sex-positive perspective, Sharon has made it clear to her daughters that she would prefer they wait to have sex: "Because there's lots of time to do that, why do it now? I mean, yes exploring bodies, yes, kissing, but you have your whole life to have sex."

As Sharon talked, I began to suspect that some of her conflict about adolescent sexual activity, in general, and her daughters' sexuality, in particular, rests in her own experiences as a heterosexual woman. For example, Sharon reveals ambivalence about her first sexual experience:

*Sharon:* It was a good one. It was planned. I knew where I was in my cycle. I knew my roommate was out. It was not heated. I mean, it was not rushed. It was not back seat of a car. It was great.

*Sinikka:* What do you attribute your sensible first sexual experience to?

*Sharon:* Well, I'm not even sure it's the healthiest thing. It would be nice to have a little bit more abandon I guess. But I kind of like to be in control. The thought of being taken advantage of just argh!

Sharon's fear that, as a woman, a man might try to sexually take advantage of her meant that she carefully planned and stayed in control of her early sexual experiences. Yet, she feels torn about this: on the one hand, she *was* in control and experienced sexual pleasure in a safe environment; on the other hand, she believes her desire for control led her to hold back something – she could not entirely lose herself in the experience and instead

maintained some distance to prevent being hurt or used. Despite her conviction that heterosexual sex is often a contested arena in which men struggle for dominance and women are punished for being easy, she is not immune to a prevalent cultural discourse of sex as an uncontrollable force that overwhelms all rational thought as it sweeps lovers up in passion and ecstasy. Hence, although her first foray into heterosexual intercourse was highly planned and she was in control, which minimized the chance that she might be sexually used or victimized, in reflection, she thinks she would have liked to experience a little more sexual abandon. This too reflects a dominant cultural understanding of sex as something that people “give in” to – a notion that “good” sex involves complete and utter abandonment (Rubin 1984).

Similarly, while Sharon is glad that her daughters get “a ton of information about sex” and sexuality from a variety of sources, including herself, their friends, media, and so on, she also wistfully says: “I wonder if it might just take some of that exploratory, kind of learning as you go, kind of stuff away, which is kind of sweet.” Sharon grew up in a liberal household and is proud that she has gone even beyond her parents’ sexual liberalism in her own household. She feels she is providing her 14- and 16-year-old daughters with much more diverse information about sexuality and hopes to equip them to enter adulthood as sexually knowledgeable, agentic young women. Yet, although Sharon wants them to be informed about sex and sexuality, she also wishes they were slightly sexually ignorant. Her use of the word “sweet” suggests that she would like her daughters to approach sex with a touch of innocence and lack of knowledge, rather than as a calculated enterprise. She expresses a sense that sex may be more rewarding when it



involves a mysterious unfolding; that too much knowledge about sex can be a spoiler. Sharon wants her daughters to be informed, yet, she also wishes they could experience sex in a fumbling, mystified fashion.

Luker's (2006) study of the sex education debates and Fields' (forthcoming) study of school-based sex education and debates both find polarization between sexual liberals and conservatives on the role of information in people's lives. Sexual conservatives seek to maintain the mystery of sex and think too much information robs sexuality of its "protective mystery" (Fields forthcoming, 123). Sexual liberals disagree. In fact, they stress the importance of demystifying sex and emphasize its naturalness. Sharon's (and Scott's forthcoming) narrative suggests much more ambivalence and an intermingling of these two positions on the role of information in young people's lives. Despite identifying as very liberal and holding strong opinions on the importance of helping young people develop sexual subjectivity, Sharon expresses some regret that the comprehensive lessons on sexuality her daughters have heard may have taken away some of the mysteries of sex.

Sharon also ruefully acknowledged that her daughters' cavalier attitudes toward dating and relationships sometimes bother her. Her older daughter, whom Sharon described as so attractive she "will make men walk into shelving in the supermarket looking at her," has only recently gone out on a couple of dates with a guy. Her younger daughter, who is "kind of straight up and down, totally different build," hangs out with a group of friends where "there are a lot of hugs. There's a lot of handholding and a lot of back rubs. With people that they would each say, 'Oh god, I wouldn't date him, he's my

friend!’” Sharon expressed exasperation with her daughters’ lack of dating and dating styles. As she puts it, “I wouldn’t mind seeing each of them just sort of June Cleaverish get a crush on a guy. You know what I mean?” By this, she means she would like them to both follow a traditional dating trajectory: “get a crush on a guy,” go out on “car dates,” and be monogamous.

However, although Sharon would like for her daughters to experience “traditional” (heterosexual) dating, she does not want them to be tied down to any one person. For example, she hopes that her older daughter does not get serious with “the guy that she now occasionally goes out with.” This is mainly because the boy is a senior and is planning to go to college in the fall. Sharon worries that if the relationship continues her daughter may miss out on other dating relationships: “I would hate to see her feel obligated not to date if she was in a committed relationship and he was not here.” She explains, “He’s a great kid, but it’d be nice if she wasn’t tied down, if she had some freedom.”

It is not surprising that Sharon is conflicted about her daughters’ dating relationships and attitudes toward dating. Her angst reflects a particular cultural moment. Americans are bombarded with contradictory discourses about femininity and heterosexual relationships. On the one hand, high divorce rates and the increase in single parenting signal, in general, that relationships can be corrosive as well as fulfilling (Edin and Kefalas 2005). People are more aware of the prevalence of domestic violence and that these dynamics extend into dating relationships. Terms like date rape and co-dependency have entered the common lexicon. But as well, young women (and,

although this applies to all women, it may be especially true for middle-class, college-bound young women like Sharon's daughters) are expected to have lives of their own: to be independent, to make something of themselves (be successful), and to support themselves.

Yet, on the other hand, despite these individualistic discourses and a greater awareness of the dangers of intimacy, a view of single life as unfulfilling, dispiriting, and depressing persists. Relationships are still culturally vaunted as important; singlehood is a second-class status (Ingraham 1999). According to these dominant discourses, true fulfillment can only be achieved in blissful communion with a loved one. Seen in this light, Sharon's ambivalence makes a great deal of sense. In thinking about dating and her teenage daughters, she struggles to reconcile numerous competing discourses of what it means to be young, female, and in a relationship in the twenty-first century.

Sharon wants her daughters to follow a traditional relationship trajectory – meet someone, fall in love, and have a monogamous dating relationship. She worries about what she calls 'their aloofness.' But, she also wants them to maintain their freedom and not be tied down to one guy. This notion of relationships as weighing young people down was particularly prevalent among the middle-class parents I interviewed. As I discussed in chapter 3, many parents expressed a very negative view of teen (heterosexual) relationships and dating. Similar to other parents (especially parents of daughters), Sharon worries that her daughters may lose their identity and autonomy in a relationship; yet, she would also like them to be less savvy and hard-nosed about dating.

Just as she wishes they could experience the mysterious unfolding of sex, she yearns for them to innocently embark on a relationship, even as she fears this.

### Scott's Story

Scott is a White, 34-year-old, middle-class father of three sons. His oldest son, Jamie, who is 14, is his wife's son from a previous marriage. I interviewed Scott and his wife, Miranda, in a deli near their workplaces. They have been married eight years. Prior to getting married, they dated for four years. Upon getting married, Scott adopted Jamie, who was six at the time. Scott and Miranda also have two sons together who are seven and three. Miranda is White. At 37, she is a few years older than Scott. Like Scott, she is Catholic. They both wore necklaces adorned with small gold crosses. Miranda identified her political views as somewhat conservative, whereas Scott identified as very conservative.

Scott and Miranda both work for the government – he as an engineer, she as an accountant. Even though, at \$127,000, their combined yearly income is high, they live modestly. They both come from working-class family backgrounds and have had to work very hard, they said, for everything they have. They own a house in a subdivision far outside of town to keep their mortgage payments low, despite the fact that this means they both have a long commute to work. They described their lifestyle as frugal out of choice and decried the spend it now, pay for it later ethos. Miranda does all of the household shopping at Wal-Mart, where the family also gets haircuts, clothing, and other items. “That’s our store,” Miranda cheerfully said.

Although I interviewed Scott and Miranda together, Scott dominated the interview. In particular, the interview frequently returned to Scott's conflict over how to raise a son who follows Catholic teachings on contraception and his belief that this is probably unrealistic. According to Scott, "The moral values that we're trying to instill are not being supported by what you see in society." Despite the strength of his religious beliefs, Scott's story, like Sharon's, underscores ambivalence and highlights the role gender, in particular, plays in shaping father-son sex talks. This finding is in line with recent studies on parents and adolescent sexuality. For example, in his study of how religion shapes the sexual values and practices of American teenagers and parents, Mark Regnerus (2007) found that religion plays a less influential role in parent-child communication about sexuality than other demographic characteristics, such as age, race/ethnicity, and gender. Debunking stereotypes about "the Latino macho father," Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2004, 1118), in her study of Mexican fathers' views of virginity, observed that Mexican immigrant fathers in the U.S. are more concerned about their daughters' socioeconomic opportunities and futures than their premarital virginity. Gonzalez-Lopez's research, like Regnerus, provides a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the role of religion in parents' decision-making (see also Gonzalez-Lopez 2007).

Scott was raised in a traditional, conservative Catholic family. He does not recall his parents ever talking about sex or issues related to bodily changes during puberty:

My parents didn't talk about this stuff, just about at all. The only thing I do remember is when the AIDS epidemic was kind of breaking on the scene and Dad

had us come in and sit down and he said, “All this stuff on the news about this, they’re talking about how anybody can get it. You need to know, behave yourself and, except in a very odd situation, you’re not going to get it, if you do what you’re supposed to do.”

Scott said his father did not have to explain to him what “behave yourself” and “do what you’re supposed to do” meant. Even though his parents never explicitly talked about sexuality, they imparted their values about it: “I knew what they thought. I got one sister who didn’t follow too well because she’s not as perceptive or maybe a little ditzy or maybe she just didn’t pick up on it as well, but I knew what they thought.” Scott “absorbed” his parents’ reactions, for example, to things on television: “I knew how they felt about things from having watched the news with them or whatever else. [They would say], ‘That’s ridiculous or that’s terrible.’”

Scott also knew his parents “were devout Catholics, right along the church’s teachings. So I didn’t have any questions about what they were teaching as being right and wrong.” Scott knew, without being explicitly told, that sex outside of marriage was wrong and that contraceptive use was forbidden. He accepted (and still accepts) these doctrines of the Catholic faith. Indeed, during the early part of our interview, I had the impression that Scott experiences his conservative beliefs in black and white. For example, he is concerned about school-based sex education because he believes it “probably teaches stuff that maybe I’d rather not have the kids be exposed to.” When I asked him what kind of information he would rather his sons were not exposed to in sex education, he replied, “Like contraception.” Scott is also unwilling personally to talk to

Jamie, his 14-year-old son, about contraception because “I told him that I support the church’s teaching that sex is for within marriage.” Scott says that, in this respect, he sets a good example: “Miranda is the only woman I’ve ever slept with.”

But as Scott and Miranda continued to talk, I came to see that, as with Sharon and other parents I interviewed, real life is far more complicated than the polarized debates suggest. For example, one might assume that in a conservative Catholic household there would be little discussion of sex. In fact, Scott and Miranda both said Jamie is very sexually curious and shared stories of his frequent questions about sex and his body, including his predilection for pornography.

Jamie has come to Scott on numerous occasions to ask about sex and things he is experiencing in his body. This may be in part because Scott is a man and because he is not Jamie’s biological father. As I discuss in chapter 2, this appears to play a role in adults’ ability to see young people as sexual beings (and vice versa). Indeed, Scott suspects this dynamic: “[Jamie] chooses to come to me and won’t talk to Miranda about a lot of it, being I’m his adoptive father.” Scott believes that even though his parents did not talk about sex and he turned out okay, Jamie needs lots of guidance. He and Miranda both view Jamie as “a follower, [who] acts immature for his age.” In addition, Scott says “honesty or truthfulness is a very difficult thing for him.” Miranda questions whether Jamie’s personality and problematic habits, like lying, are based on “nature or nurture.” She explains, “because his biological father would lie through his teeth no matter what.”

When Jamie was in fifth grade, he asked Scott “a bunch of questions – he grilled me for thirty minutes.” According to Scott, much of the conversation was about sex:

He asked about some of the mechanics of sex and [then said], “Why would you do that?” And I explained that that’s how babies are made and all. Then, as we were finishing up the conversation he said, “Well, have you ever?” Well, he has two little brothers, one at the time and one on the way, so I said yes. And then, of course, the next follow up question was, “Well, how many times?” And my answer was, “Well, I don’t really keep track.” I thought of saying, well, twice.

You got two brothers (laughing)! But I didn’t say that.

Scott was somewhat torn about how honest to be in this discussion with his son. If sex is for procreation, then a person should only have sex with that explicit intention. Yet, despite wanting to follow Catholic doctrine, Scott and Miranda use condoms to limit the number of children they have. Scott would like for his life to better fit the Catholic model and experiences conflict about the example he is setting. Ultimately, Scott says honesty is the key to effective parenting, and so he was honest with Jamie. But at the same time, as a heterosexual man, Scott may experience pride in, and want to underscore, his sexual competence and convey to Jamie a sense of sexual agency. According to R. W. Connell (1995), an important part of hegemonic masculinity – the dominant form of masculinity at any given time – is bodily agency, acting through one’s body, and this includes heterosexual prowess. Seen in this light, hegemonic masculinity may have trumped religious faith in Scott and his son’s conversation.

This is not to say, however, that Scott wants to have an explicit conversation with Jamie about contraception. He has shied away from this in large part because, despite using contraception himself, he wants Jamie to follow the church’s teachings on



contraceptive use. But both Scott and Miranda described Jamie as such an inquisitive child that it is difficult to keep information from him. On one occasion, Scott came home from a fishing trip and found Jamie in his bathroom trying on one of his condoms:

I walked up and saw him there and looked at him for a second going, how do I respond to this? So I just turned around and walked out. So he notices that I'm walking out and he runs out [yelling] "Dad! Dad! What are you doing? What's wrong?" He was very concerned that I was going to go nuts or something. And I said, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm getting my wet clothes out of the car."

Scott confessed he does not fully remember how he handled this situation:

I know I didn't get mad about it, but we didn't talk in-depth. I guess I wasn't quite one hundred percent sure what to tell him about it. Some of it may be being self-conflicted myself. I was brought up Catholic and condoms aren't a part of the equation and so, I'm going to have this discussion with him and talk about condoms and, on the one hand, say it's okay? Well, then, that's kind of against how I'm bringing him up in the church and stuff. So I'm self-conflicted about it. Honesty is how I want to handle everything, so I'm not quite sure what to say. So I didn't say much of anything in reaction to that.

Scott is well aware that the prohibition on contraception does not fit easily into today's world where sex is deemed an integral part of marital life (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Giddens 1992; Rubin 1990). Indeed, despite believing that contraceptive use is wrong, he and his wife use condoms to limit the number of children they have. Scott wants to be honest with Jamie: he and Miranda said that honesty propels all their

parenting practices. Yet, on the condom issue, Scott is torn. He does not want to be a hypocrite, but he also does not want to condone sex outside of marriage. Ultimately, he wants Jamie to follow the traditional Catholic decree on contraception.

However, Scott is not entirely convinced that Jamie will wait to have sex until marriage: “I have that feeling of, what’s the likelihood he’s going to make it there without [having sex]. There’s that certain level of cynicism.” Yet, despite Jamie’s active sexual curiosity, Scott does not see him as someone who is going to seek out sex. Scott explains, “He’s not the type to initiate [sex].” But Scott does think his son is the type who might easily succumb to sexual advances: “There are girls out there these days that would [initiate sex]. And he’s not a, oh no, I can’t do that [type of person]. [The] willpower to say, ‘Oh no, that’s not good,’ is probably not going to be there for him.” Hence, Scott believes his son may face temptation from girls to have sex and, because he views him as “a follower,” is afraid that he will not say no.

As I discussed in chapter 2, in general, many parents have a difficult time imagining their children having sex out of their own sexual desire. In part because parents see the pressures to have sex as so great for their teenagers and view their teenagers as asexual, many believe that their teens may have sex not because they want to but because they are forced or pressured into it. Although this has been a common understanding of female adolescent sexual activity (Martin 1996; Phillips 2000), parents of both daughters *and* sons expressed this worry. Regardless of their child’s gender, many parents fear that he or she will be forced into doing something sexually before he/she is ready. Parents’ ambivalence centers on their children having sex with the

wrong person, being pushed into sex, and/or being sexually used, along with other negative consequences of sex.

I asked Scott, “So if, for example, Jamie did have sex as a teenager, what do you think would ensure that he did use precautions?” He replied, “Well, because of my conflixtions, I guess we haven’t addressed that. I’ve thought about it but I haven’t said anything because I’m not sure what to say or which way to go.” Despite their open discussions, Scott truly believes he may be incapable of talking to Jamie about contraception. He is too conflicted. Indeed, even though Scott expressed annoyance that school-based sex education provides information about contraception, he later added, “It’s hard to say but I guess it’s a bit of a relief that Jamie gets that [information] someplace.” Despite Scott’s earlier assertion that the problem with sex education is that it teaches young people about contraception (that is, if it is not abstinence-only), he expresses relief that his son has gleaned this information from some source.

Scott is similarly conflicted about Jamie’s interest in pornography. Over the past two years, he and Miranda have regularly discovered that Jamie has viewed pornography in one format or another. During the summer between sixth and seventh grade, Jamie ordered “one hundred and twenty dollars worth of pay-per-view adult movies.” The charges for these movies appeared on Scott and Miranda’s cable bill at the end of the month. Scott explains, “We didn’t know that there are ways to block it. Didn’t have it blocked. Of course [we] blocked it after that.” More recently, Jamie has “somehow managed to get through [the parental blocks] and he ordered a couple more,” which also

showed up on their cable bill. Miranda said when she confronted Jamie about these latest charges for adult movies,

He was like, “Well, after five minutes I turned them off. I didn’t want to watch them anymore.” But he did try to use psychology on me a little. When we were discussing this he goes, “Mom, you know, they have research studies out there that say once you watch it one time, it becomes almost an obsession that you need to continue to watch it.” So, now that he’s 14, he’s started trying to play that logic.

Jamie suggested to his mother that he is not interested in pornography, and, at the same time, that he is obsessed with it. Miranda prefers the former explanation. She said, “I really, honestly don’t think he’s that interested.” However, Jamie has also accessed pornography online. According to Scott, “It’s varied with time and, of course, he’s gotten better with time in covering his tracks. In fact, the last time I found he was going to those sites was by reviewing what he was doing on his MySpace site.”

The first time Scott and Miranda discovered Jamie was viewing pornography, they decided the best “deterrent of repeat offenses” (Scott) was to sit him down and make him tell them everything he saw. As Miranda put it, “We asked him, on the spot, ‘What did you see? We want vivid descriptions. We want actuals.’” For Miranda this tactic was primarily to counter the messages about sex her son had seen. In particular, she worries about how women and female sexuality are portrayed in pornography. Scott, however, said his goal was simply to embarrass Jamie into never watching pornography again. Miranda describes the three of them talking for an hour and a half, “[We asked

him], ‘How were they having sex? Who?’ We explained to him, ‘If you’re old enough to watch this, we need to sit and discuss this so you know that this is not everyday, routine life.’” After an hour and a half, Miranda excused herself and said that was when Jamie really opened up: “That meeting opened up a floodgate, because they were in there another hour taking about his body and things that were happening and stuff like that.”

I asked Scott and Miranda if, during these discussions or at any other time, Jamie has ever said that watching pornography excited him. Scott cleared his throat before replying:

I don’t think –. And one of the things that’s interesting that I haven’t fully gotten to the bottom of is that a lot of the sites that he goes to end up being the gay sites. And I’ve talked to him about that quite a bit. I don’t – I think some of that may be his concern with size. He’s wanting to see how he sizes up. He insists that he’s not [gay] and I have not played upon, well you better not be or anything like that. I’ve expressed to him that he needs to let us know if he has feelings that way. “Let us know because you can’t go through life hiding those feelings, it’s too hard on you.” But he’s so ready to lie about little things, something big like that is going to be really hard for him to come clean on. So that’s another issue that mixes in there and I’m not sure how that works out. There’s not – besides that, I don’t have any indications that he’s attracted to guys.

As Miranda did earlier, Scott downplays the extent to which Jamie watches porn out of sexual interest or desire. Despite wanting to deter “repeat offenses,” Scott views Jamie’s interest in pornography primarily in terms of technical curiosity: “to see how he sizes

up.” Indeed, Scott revealed that, as a teenager, he learned about “the mechanics” of sex by watching pornography. He explained that because his parents were unwilling to talk about sex, when he was younger, “I didn’t necessarily know a lot about the mechanics – although, I did have a friend who had a satellite dish (laughing)!” Scott quickly added, “I don’t try and operate from the it’s okay because I did it or whatever.” Yet, his own personal experiences with pornography clearly influence how he makes sense of Jamie’s interest in it.

In the above quote, Scott also reveals ambivalence about the possibility that Jamie is gay. He minimizes the extent to which Jamie might actually be gay, while professing acceptance if he is. He believes Jamie seeks out gay porn because of practical concerns – he wants to see how his penis sizes up relative to other men – not because he is gay. Scott explains that penis size has been an ongoing worry of Jamie’s: “[When he was younger], he was fixated on size for a while. Like he wasn’t sure if he was normal or something.” Scott also stresses that he does not have any other indication that Jamie is “attracted to guys” and suggests that being gay is a big thing “to come clean on.” Scott later mentioned, in comparing himself to his liberal neighbor, that he is against gay marriage. Yet, despite his conservative views, Scott does not want Jamie to feel as though being gay is wrong and something that must be hidden. He encourages Jamie to talk about his feelings “because you can’t go through life hiding those feelings, it’s too hard on you.”

R. W. Connell argues that “compulsory heterosexuality,” the term Adrienne Rich (1986) coined to describe the enforcement of female heterosexuality, is an important

component of masculine enactment. C. J. Pascoe (2007), in her ethnographic study of a working class high school, has more recently used the term “compulsive heterosexuality” to emphasize boys’ ritualized and interactional accomplishment of heterosexuality. Compulsory/compulsive heterosexuality also seems to shape Scott and Jamie’s sex talks. Although Scott is highly ambivalent about his own contraceptive use and has been unable to talk to Jamie about contraception, they have talked openly about a wide range of sexual and bodily issues. Through these talks, Scott implicitly introduces Jamie to a masculine world of sexual agency and privilege. His status as a heterosexual man, and his desire that Jamie develop a similar sexual identity (seen in his concern about his son’s interest in gay pornography), may facilitate their open discussions about sexuality. In this sense, despite identifying as very conservative and opposed to contraception use, Scott may be well positioned to talk with his son about sexuality – it provides an opportunity for male bonding and a way for Scott to establish his competence as a heterosexual man and to work to help Jamie accomplish the same status.

### Conclusion

*Sinikka:* A lot of parents feel that sex education should be taught at school, what do you think about that?

*Melissa:* No way José! Parents brought them into this world, they’re the ones that need to introduce it to them. That is a private conversation depending on your faith and how you want to explain it to your children. Why would you leave something that is of ultimate importance up to someone else concerning your children? (43, White, upper middle class, 4 children ages 16 to 9)

I just remind [my daughters], I've heard that a lot of the girls in other families use methods of contraception, and [I tell them], "You're not going to do that, so if you're going to be promiscuous you're going to end up getting pregnant, and if you are promiscuous you're not going to know who the father is like these other girls." (Rosalia, 43, Latina, poor, 5 children ages 22 to 9)

Based on my understanding of the polarized and polarizing debates over sex education (Fields forthcoming; Irvine 2002; Levine; Luker 2006), when I started this project, I expected to hear a significant number of parents talk about sex education and their children's sexuality like Melissa and Rosalia. Instead, these two respondents were the exceptions to the rule: ambivalence and ambiguity prevailed. Ambivalence is the simultaneous experience of two or more conflicting feelings that may be rooted in social structural conditions. It is an ever-present tension that characterized parents' understandings about their teenagers' sexuality. In part because many parents have difficulty seeing their children as sexual subjects, yet remember what it was like to be a teenager, they are conflicted about when to talk to them, how much to tell them, and in what manner to convey it. Their ambivalence stems in part from their own experiences and the difficulties they have in seeing their children as sexual beings, but is also informed by the larger cultural discourses of adolescent sexuality. In particular, the discourse of abstinence-until-marriage permeates parents' narratives. Many of the



parents I interviewed adopt this discourse even if they do not believe it is realistic or the best course of action.

In contrast to Luker (2006) and Fields (forthcoming), who find, in the debates over sex education, polarized views on the utility of providing young people with information about sexuality, the parents in this study expressed marked ambivalence about the role of information in young people's lives. As we saw in chapter 2, many parents fear that providing information about contraception "just in case" may give the message that they condone sexual activity. But most parents I interviewed provide this information anyway, despite feeling conflicted, because they believe it is necessary and, indeed, life saving information. In fact, some of the more conservative parents, like Melissa and Corina, have talked very explicitly about sex and contraception, whereas other, more liberal parents, like Gina and Paula, have not. Their conflict and ambivalence derive, at least in part, from their own experiences. These are informed by, and cannot be understood apart from, their social locations, including gender, race, class, and religious dynamics.

In particular, this chapter reveals how gender both facilitates and hinders parents' understandings of their children as sexual subjects and discussions of sex with their children. Gender works in such a way that Sharon, a self-identified liberal mother who wants her daughters to develop sexual subjectivity, simultaneously fears for her daughters' sexual victimization and vulnerability and is torn about how and when her daughters' can exercise sexual agency. Sharon's story shows how difficult it is for parents to navigate both desire and coercion in their discussions about sex with their

children, daughters in particular, as well as in their own thinking about their children's sexuality (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003; Vance 1984). It also underscores the contradictory place of relationships in young women's lives. Sharon wants her daughters to date normatively, yet not be tied down. She fears "the tyranny of coupling" (Ingraham 1999, 167), seeing it as difficult for her daughters to maintain independence within the context of a committed relationship, at the same time that she wants this for them. Sharon's ambivalence, and the ambivalence expressed by other parents I interviewed, highlights the contradictions embedded in gender and sexual identities (Halley 1993) and, hence, the instability of these categories and possibilities for their unraveling (Connell 1995).

But as well, in parents' attempts to negotiate gendered and sexualized meanings, the centrality of sexualized meanings to gender and the centrality of gendered meanings to sexuality emerge. Scott, a self-avowed very conservative father, engages in detailed and regular sex talk with his adopted son, ostensibly in the hopes of controlling his sexual behavior, but also to solidify his son's masculine identity. We see the tension embodied in Scott's gender and sexual work: he wants his son to be both asexual (chaste, virginal) and heteronormatively masculine (heterosexual, virile, a leader rather than a follower). By stressing abstinence and religious faith, Scott pushes for a masculinized version of his son as possessed with leadership qualities and self-control, despite nagging doubts that his son may not achieve this ideal. As Pascoe (2007, 112) documents in her ethnographic portrait of a working-class high school, based on discourses of masculinity that center on self-control and maturity, self-identified religious male high school students use sexual restraint to "cast themselves as more mature than other boys." Similarly, Scott's gender

and sexual practices and hopes for his son rest on an understanding that to be a man is to exercise authority over others and mastery over one's own bodily desires. Yet, he also expresses unease that this may be difficult, if not impossible, for his son to accomplish.

Thus, in line with my overall argument in this dissertation, this chapter underscores the importance of examining the larger social structures that shape parents' understandings of their children's sexuality, what Jeffrey Weeks (1992, 394) calls "the forms of control, the patterns of domination, subordination, and resistance that shape the sexual." Parents want their children to follow a path of "what is sexually normal, acceptable, legitimate, and valued" (Fields forthcoming, 202). But, in doing so, they take their cues from their children, from their understandings of society, and from their own sexual experiences. These real life knowledges and experiences are often more complex than the polarized debates over adolescent sexuality suggest (Plummer 2003). Yet, the stories presented in this chapter also underscore the role social inequality plays in shaping parents' understandings of, and ambivalence about, their children's sexuality. Given the dependent nature of parent-child relationships, some degree of ambivalence is no doubt inevitable. Nevertheless, gender and sexual inequalities appear to magnify the ambivalence parents expressed about their children's sexuality. The parents' ambivalence is shaped by sexist and heteronormative conditions and cultural logics in U.S. society that encourage a climate in which, for example, sexuality is dangerous for girls and women and an achievement for boys and men, and homosexuality is a deviant, second-class status. Ultimately, then, this chapter suggests that gender inequality and

heteronormativity may increase the difficulties parents have in viewing their children as fully sexual subjects.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION:**

#### **THINKING ABOUT TEEN SEXUALITY, SOCIAL INEQUALITY, AND PARENTING**

It is an interesting aspect of the debates over sex education that parents are often used on one side or the other, but parents' attitudes, beliefs, and strategies to intervene in their teens' sexual lives are rarely examined. Through in-depth interviews with 47 parents of teenagers, I found that parents do not view their own teenagers as sexual subjects, even as they posit other teens as highly sexual and sexualized. Parents articulated this binary thinking across race and class and regardless of their children's actual sexual behavior. This understanding is so hegemonic it appears to transcend racial or class differences and to have become an everyday common-sense understanding.

Does it matter that parents do not view their children as sexual beings, even as they see other teenagers as hypersexual? As I have argued, binaries are a critical component of social inequality – they serve as a way to reinforce difference. Through their binary thinking, parents contribute to the notion that teen sexuality is bad, hence, teens who have sex are bad and any negative consequences that befall them are their own fault (unless the teenager in question is their own child).

However, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, there are a number of very real cultural, structural, and psychological reasons why parents feel this

way about their children's sexuality. In this conclusion, therefore, I would like to reflect on the sociocultural conditions that might enable parents to view their children as sexual beings. To do so, we need to return to what prevents parents from viewing their children as sexual subjects: the pervasive culture of sexual fear in the U.S.; dominant constructions of adolescence; social inequality, including inequalities based on gender, race, class, and sexuality; and an American ethos of individualism, which situates the blame for any bad outcomes of teen sexual activity on parents and their children, rather than on the larger social structures that shape young people's (and their parents') life choices and opportunities.

First, let us consider the culture of sexual fear and dominant understandings of adolescence. I began this dissertation with a description of the battle over sex education in Texas in 2004. Ultimately, after three heated school board meetings, the abstinence-only position prevailed. The new student health textbook adopted in Texas does not contain information about contraception and the gender-neutral descriptors have been replaced with gender-specific ones – for example, marriage is now defined as a lifelong union between a man and a woman. These changes were not made without controversy: one board member resigned in disgust and protest over the outcome, and publishers ultimately rejected changes emphasizing the “negative aspects” of homosexuality, including language that said homosexuals are more likely to use illegal drugs and commit suicide.

Yet, what I found sitting in the school board meetings, in line with what others have found in examining the debates over sex education (Fields forthcoming; Irvine

2002; Luker 2006), is that despite their differences, comprehensive and abstinence-only sex ed proponents framed adolescent sexuality in very similar ways. During one of the meetings, for example, I wrote the following in my fieldnotes:

Although people all around me are engaged in heated debate, what they are saying sounds remarkably similar. Today two speakers – one for, one against abstinence-only sex ed – provided graphic and horrific descriptions of the damage sexual activity can wreak on young people's bodies. One described seeing herpes that looked like cigarette burns on young women's vulva. The other said that young people use plastic bags as condoms and douche with Coke in the hope that this will prevent pregnancy and STDs. These testimonies, although very similar in content, reached very different conclusions. In the first instance, the graphic descriptions of STDs were given as an example of what happens when young people have sex. In the second, the graphic examples were used to show what happens when young people are deprived of information about how to protect themselves and have sex.

In my interviews with parents of teenagers, rather than expressing either firm abstinence-only or comprehensive sex ed positions, most articulated a complex and sometimes contradictory mixture of the two. Regardless of their political views, most parents I interviewed would prefer that their children wait to have sex until marriage or adulthood, yet many also expressed a belief that this is unrealistic. These parents experience conflict over what they see as an ideal sexual trajectory (abstinence-until-marriage) and a realistic one (most people do not wait until marriage).

What seems more salient, and the issue that was never mentioned either in the debates I witnessed, by the sex ed teachers I talked to, or by most of the parents I interviewed, is how adolescent sexuality is currently being framed in our society – the taken-for-granted understandings of adolescent sexuality. The parents I interviewed think sex is far more dangerous today than it was in their time. Parents’ understandings of adolescent sexuality are very much in line with the discourse of fear that dominates debates about, and depictions of, adolescent sexuality in the U.S. (Fields forthcoming; Irvine 1994, 2002; Luker 2006). Based on this hegemonic paradigm, sex equals intercourse equals danger, disease, death, or, at the very least, heartache.

Yet, even as adolescent sexuality is described in risk-based terms, sex is regularly depicted as an uncontrollable drive to which teenagers, *in particular*, because of hormones and their lack of impulse control, are susceptible (Schalet 2000, 2004). At the same time, teenagers are often framed and understood as irresponsible and not yet capable of handling the responsibilities that accompany sexual activity. Hence, even parents who believe their children might have sex in adolescence, have a difficult time viewing this positively. They decide that teenagers need contraceptive information in case their more sexual peers push them into sex or they are overwhelmed with sexual “urges” and “do something crazy.” And, as we have seen, in part owing to a pervasive culture of sexual shame, in providing this information, parents often feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, and prefer to distance themselves from sexuality, sensing that their children are appalled by the idea of their parent(s) having sex. Most parents described their



discussions of sex and sexuality with their teenagers as focusing on the risks and negative consequences of sexual intercourse, including pregnancy, disease, and victimization.

Thus, based, in part, on a prevalent culture of sexual fear and dominant ways of thinking about teenagers, parents have difficulty viewing their children as sexual subjects. This understanding is not preordained or set in stone. Indeed, according to Gayle Rubin (1984, 267), the times when sexuality is fiercely contested represent times when “the domain of the erotic life...is renegotiated.” Sexuality is not a fixed entity; it is fluid, changing, and contested – a site of social control and resistance. For example, in her study of American and Dutch parents’ attitudes about adolescent sexuality, Amy Schalet (2000, 2004) stresses that the Dutch did not always consider adolescent sexuality as normal and unproblematic. A vigorous public health campaign, begun over two decades ago, supported the normalization of adolescent sexuality in the Netherlands. Schalet (2004, 13) writes:

Dutch healthcare professionals, sex educators and policy makers have, throughout the last 2 decades of the 20th century, supported the 3 components that constitute the normalization of adolescent sexuality in Dutch middle-class families -- namely, the emphasis on the self-regulatory capacities and responsibilities of adolescents; the norm that sex should take place in intimate relationships of mutual respect; and, finally, the desire to have sex be a normal topic of discussion between parents and teenagers, and not a cause for anxiety and deception.

Schalet offers several important avenues for transforming the culture of sexual fear and shame in the United States, including public health campaigns that normalize adolescent

sexuality and widely available, low-cost contraception. An expanded understanding of sexual activity may also help parents view their children as sexual subjects. Jessica Fields (forthcoming), for example, argues that the definition of sexual activity should encompass the broad range of sexual behaviors that constitute sexuality, from talking and thinking about sexuality to sexual intercourse. As Fields (204) notes, “Young people live in a world filled with sexual images, opportunities, narratives, and possibilities....[as such] they are all sexually active.”

In thinking about challenging understandings of teen sexuality, however, it is important to recognize that the Netherlands represents a very different social context from the U.S. For one, it has a national healthcare system. In addition, it is a far more ethnoracially and economically homogeneous society than the U.S. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, social inequality plays an important role in parents’ understandings of their children’s sexuality. In particular, racist, sexist, elitist, and heterosexist discourses and ideologies shape parents’ understandings of teen sexuality and their lessons to their teenagers about sexuality. As we have seen, parents do not simply struggle to see their children as sexual subjects because sexual activity implies danger and adulthood; they also indicated an understanding that teen sexuality indicates “badness.”

Many parents equate adolescent sexual activity not just with heartache, disease, and pregnancy, but with promiscuity and deviance, a lack of focus or drive, something they do not associate with their own children. In doing so, they rely on dominant discourses of adolescent sexuality that are laced through with inequalities of race, class,

and gender. In this nation, teen sexuality is often constructed as a problem of race/ethnicity, class, and gender (Bettie 2003; Fields forthcoming; Kaplan 1996; Luttrell 2003), and homosexuality is associated with perversity and deviance (Irvine 2002; Pascoe 2007; Rubin 1984; Stein 2006). Parents' understandings reflect these dominant discourses. This suggests that, in addition to challenging the culture of sexual fear and dominant constructions of adolescence, we need to confront and resist understandings of sexuality that evoke and rely upon racist, sexist, heteronormative, and elitist cultural logics. Not only do these understandings promote the inferiority of others, they also generate distrust and a sense of differentness, all of which serve to perpetuate and justify social hierarchies and inequalities (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Schwalbe 2008).

In many cases, parents base their concerns not simply on their beliefs and stereotypes about race, class, gender, and sexuality, however, but also their *experiences* of inequality – gender inequality, in particular. Many of the mothers I interviewed shared stories of their own struggles to achieve sexual autonomy and/or pleasure as teenagers (and adults) in a society that denigrates female sexuality. Based on their experiences of adversarial heterosexual relationships, they worry that if their children, daughters and sons, have sex as teenagers, they will be hurt, socially, physically, and emotionally. Mothers also said they feel discredited by their children, sons in particular, when they try to talk with their teenagers about sexuality. These gender and sexual dynamics and inequalities shape parents' discussions with their children about sexuality (or lack thereof) and the extent to which parents are able to view their children as sexual subjects. Hence, while parents often reproduce social inequality in their understandings of and

lessons about sexuality, many also grapple with inequality in their own lives. The tensions emanating from these contradictions, ambivalences, and inequities indicate “crisis tendencies” (Connell 1995, 84) – schisms in the dominant gender and sexual order – that may lead parents to question and challenge hegemonic understandings of teen sexuality.

But as well, in the hyperindividualistic environment of the US, children’s outcomes and well-being are considered solely the responsibility of their parents. Many parents spoke of the enormous pressures and financial hardships of raising children and their fears about their own and their children’s futures. Yet, parents were also very hard on themselves and hard on other parents. In line with the teachers I spoke to and larger society, the parents I interviewed ultimately blamed bad parenting for bad children. Across social class categories, parents said children’s outcomes and well-being are a reflection of parenting abilities. Corina (39, Black, working class) articulated the prevailing opinion of the parents I interviewed. Despite asserting during her interview that the American government “sucks,” that President Bush is “screwing all of us over,” and that “it takes a village to raise a child,” when I asked, “How do you think we can make it better?” she replied:

How can we make it better? Well I guess one is we start with your own family first. Your own family first. Start with your family. Can they help out with the kids? Can they help out with the picking up and the dropping off? Spending time, going to do activities together as a family. I’m a true believer in families –

closeness, bonding, stuff like that...I think it starts with the family. I think if you have a close-knit family that can rectify the problems.

Although parenting practices may vary based on social class (Lareau 2003), parents across the class spectrum hold notions about parental accountability, particularly when it comes to teen sexual behavior. As Elaine Bell Kaplan (1996, 82) found in her study of Black teen mothers and their mothers, “successful mothering means passing on social values to children.” These mothers told Kaplan that mothers, in particular, should be able to control their daughters’ sexual behavior. A teen pregnancy signals failure on the part of the teen’s mother to do so. Although I interviewed a much smaller number of fathers, I found that both mothers and fathers articulated the belief that it is ultimately up to parents to direct and control adolescent sexuality.

This dissertation, by contrast, points to the need to employ “the sociological imagination” (Mills 1959) – to see that the problems and challenges around teen sexuality that parents’ and their children face are not rooted in parental failure and/or adolescent behavior, but rather have their origins in the larger cultural ideologies and institutional arrangements that structure parents’ and children’s lives. Parents’ understandings of teen sexuality reflect the myriad inequalities and hierarchies in American society based on age, race, class, gender, and sexuality. For these reasons and others, it is difficult for parents to imagine their children expressing a full range of sexual feelings and behaviors. The parents’ narratives also reveal that they experience their teenagers as highly resistant to family sex talks. Parents said their teens actively rebuff their attempts to talk about sexuality, telling their parents they do not need or want this information. In other words,

parents do not simply conjure out of thin air an image of their teenagers as asexual, their children appear to actively encourage this notion.

Based on their understandings of teen sexuality and their own sense of accountability, parents practice protection and surveillance. Yet, we have seen that, depending on economic inequality, parents have different resources to draw on in protecting their children. Parental protection and surveillance, hence, is an individual, privatized solution to the problem of adolescent sexuality with different consequences for young people depending on their social class. If we, as a nation, continue to depict adolescent sexuality in fear-based terms, then, as a nation, we need to establish a social safety net that protects all young people. However, as I hope I have shown in this study, a more fruitful approach should focus not simply on making sexuality safer for youth but also on radically altering current understandings of teen sexuality and the conditions of social inequality that inform them. For this too, and perhaps especially, will make sexuality a safer, more affirming arena for American youth and adults.

### Implications and Future Directions

What are the implications of this study? If we return once again to those public school board meetings I attended, this study point to the need to shift the focus away from what parents, teenagers, and schools are saying and doing to what they are thinking – the taken-for-granted discourses about adolescence, sexuality, and families – and how these are linked to and reproduce social inequalities. This study also has implications for how sex education is currently taught. Sex ed researchers, such as Jessica Fields (forthcoming) and Michelle Fine (1988, 2006), observe that sex ed frames adolescent

sexuality as hormonally driven, hard to control, inherently dangerous, and a deviant behavior. Parents think about adolescent sexuality in general in this way, but not their own teenagers. This provides insight into the confusing and contradictory messages young people may be getting about sexuality. But as well, over the past 20 decades, governmental policies and decisions around sex education have been based on the understanding that parents are their children's best sex educators. This dissertation, by contrast, underscores the difficulties parents encounter both in seeing their children as sexual subjects and in talking to their teenagers about sexuality.

Third, this study contributes to the growing call to examine gender and sexuality as mutually reinforcing, yet independent, forms of inequality. We cannot collapse gender into sexuality or sexuality into gender, but rather the focus should be on how these two intersect and are conditioned by other axes of inequality. For example, my research suggests that in the current sociocultural climate, gender and sexuality are highly conditioned by age. The parents' narratives reveal that ideas about what it means to be masculine, feminine, and a sexual subject are shaped by understandings of adolescence and adulthood, immaturity and maturity. As we increasingly divide the adult world from the realm of childhood and adolescence, age becomes an ever more important axis of inequality and should be studied as such.

These findings suggest a number of future research projects. A comparative study looking at whether this way of thinking about teen sexuality is unique to American parents or is present in other sociocultural contexts would help us tease out how this understanding is linked to cultural ideologies and the social structure. For example, in

Canada there is a national health care system. Yet there is also a great deal of ethnoracial and economic diversity. Canadians, thus, have more of a social safety net, but may also experience conditions of social inequality: (how) do these conditions shape how Canadian parents think about their children's sexuality?

In addition, future studies should examine how teen sexuality is understood and talked about in different family forms. For example, how do gay and lesbian parents – whose very being, in a society that conflates homosexuality with sexual activity, is often tied to sexuality – talk to their children about sex? What about single-parent households? In my study, for example, the gender dynamics I observed between mothers and their teenage sons appear to be amplified in female-headed households with teenage boys.

Lastly, a study solely with, or one that includes more, fathers of teenage sons represents a critical next step. Past research with fathers of preschool-aged children, suggests that fathers feel particularly responsible for crafting their sons' heterosexual orientation (particularly, heterosexual fathers) (Kane 2006). I interviewed six fathers for this project. Of these, only three have teenage sons. I could not discern a clear pattern in these three fathers' attitudes about their sons' sexuality. As we saw in chapter 4, Scott is conflicted about his son's sexuality – he wants his son to be heterosexual, but he does not want him to be sexually active. The other two fathers of teenage sons I interviewed seemed somewhat more willing to accept and acknowledge their sons' sexuality, but, like Scott, both characterized their sons as potential victims, susceptible to the sexual wiles of teenage girls. I should emphasize, therefore, that my finding that parents view their sons



as asexual is based primarily on mothers' understandings. Fathers of teenage sons and daughters represent an important area of future research.

### Conclusion

During the summer of 2007, I interviewed for a job in a sociology department that emphasizes applied research. They asked me very generally about my dissertation and then focused on the policy implications of my study, something for which I was not yet fully prepared to answer. One of the interviewers queried, "Okay, you are meeting with the governor of Texas to talk about the HPV<sup>1</sup> vaccine, what are you going to say?" I began feebly, "Well, I'd explain my research and suggest that perhaps the decision to inoculate their daughters against a sexually transmitted disease may be a very hard one for parents to make because, in general, parents do not see their children as sexual beings." This was clearly too vague and not the answer they were seeking. One of the interviewers prompted: "You'd advise him to start parenting classes to help teach parents how to deal with their kids' sexuality. You would say that, wouldn't you?" Being cowardly, I agreed that I would, but felt uncomfortable with this proposal. Numerous practical questions spring to mind when I think about developing and holding parent classes: How would you reach parents? Which parents would attend? Would parent education be mandatory? How would that be enforced? What would be taught? But

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<sup>1</sup> HPV (human papillomavirus) is a sexually transmitted virus that, in certain forms, can cause cervical cancer. In the spring of 2007, Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, issued an executive order directing the Health and Human Services Commission to adopt rules requiring all girls age 11 and 12 to receive the HPV vaccine prior to entering sixth grade. The mandatory vaccination order created a furor in Texas, largely because it was said to violate parents' rights, and was eventually quashed.

also, this proposed policy simply continues to privatize the problem of teen sexuality. It suggests that the problem is parents' faulty understandings, not the dominant cultural logics of adolescence and sexuality and the social inequalities that shape parents' beliefs and experiences. As I have tried to show throughout this dissertation, it may be very difficult for parents to conceptualize their children as sexual subjects in the current social and cultural climate. If I could do this job interview over again, I would say to the interviewer: I'm not sure parenting classes are the way to go. Parents do need an affirming language to talk and think about adolescent sexuality. But they also need to be able to talk to their children about sexuality without fearing societal condemnation. They need permission to both see their children as sexual and to present themselves as sexual subjects. But as well, they, and their children, need mutually respectful, safe, fulfilling relationships, whether these relationships conform to normative standards or not. Parents and their children also need and deserve safe neighborhoods, good schools, quality health care, and optimistic economic futures. We need diverse policies designed to address the pervasive culture of sexual fear *and* the conditions of inequality that structure parents' and their children's lives. These changes, I believe, would help parents recognize their children as fully sexual subjects.

## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

#### Family life

1. How would you DESCRIBE \_\_\_(your son/daughter)?
  - a. What school does he/she attend?
2. Describe a typical day.
  - a. What is your relationship with \_\_\_ like? Tell me about the kinds of things you do together.
3. How often do you DISAGREE? What kinds of things do you disagree about? How do you resolve disagreements?
4. How important do you think it is to have RULES for teens? What kinds of rules do you have? (e.g., does \_\_\_ have a curfew? Rules about school attendance? Chores? Drinking alcohol? Smoking? Dating? R-rated movies? TV?) How do you ENFORCE the rules?
5. Do you and your partner (\_\_\_'s father/mother) agree on how best to raise teenagers?

**Puberty** – these next few questions are about the developmental and physical changes kids may go through during puberty & adolescence.

6. When did you notice your child entering puberty? How did you know? What changes did you notice him/her going through at this time? (bodies, hormones)
  - a. How **did it make you feel** to see him/her changing?
7. Have you TALKED with \_\_\_ about puberty? How did he/she respond?
8. Do you think there are DIFFERENCES between being a teenager and growing up today compared to when you were a teen?
9. Are there issues that \_\_\_ has faced or is facing as a teenager that have SURPRISED you or that you weren't expecting?

**Dating** – these next few questions are about dating.

10. At what age did \_\_ become interested in dating and relationships? How did/do you feel about this?
11. Has \_\_\_ EVER DATED? If so, what was his/her first date like? Can you remember how you felt/what you did? Did you meet the date?
12. Has \_\_ ever ASKED YOU Qs about dating or relationships? (PROBE: etiquette – who calls, gifts to give, feeling pressured to date, etc)
13. Has \_\_ ever dated someone who was a different RACE/ETHNICITY? How did you feel about that?
  - a. What about RELIGION? Has \_\_ ever dated someone who had a different religious upbringing? (OR if not dating, would you allow...)

**Sex** – these next few questions are about sex.

14. Have you ever talked with \_\_ about sex? What have your experiences talking to \_\_\_ about sex been like? What did you say? How did the conversation(s) come about?
  - a. Ever talked about CONTRACEPTION?
  - b. ABORTION?
  - c. MASTURBATION?
  - d. Ever talked about SEXUAL ORIENTATION? PROBE: ever talked about being gay, straight or bisexual?) Has \_\_ ever asked you about sexual orientation? What do you want \_\_ to know about sexual orientation? How **would you feel** if you found out that \_\_ was gay?
  - e. BEING READY? – When do you think someone is ready to have sex? (when did \_\_ become curious about sex?)
15. Has he/she ever asked you anything about sex? If so, what?
16. How COMFORTABLE do you feel talking to \_\_\_ about sex and sexuality? How did you feel about the information you provided? How did \_\_ respond?
17. Sometimes parents are caught off guard when they talk with their kids about sex b/c the kids ask personal questions. Has \_\_ ever ask you personal questions about your own sexuality or want to know about your sex life?
18. Has \_\_ received any sex education at school? IF YES, what has he/she learned about sex at school? (PROBE: mechanics, STDS, resisting peer pressure). How do you feel about the sex education program at \_\_\_'s school?
  - a. Did you ever meet the teacher who taught sex ed? Previewed material?
  - b. Do you think sex ed should be taught at school?

19. At what AGE should young people start learning about sex? **What do you think is important for young people to know about sex?** (PROBE: Some people believe that teens should be taught how to make good decisions about sex – do you agree?)
20. Thinking back to when you were \_\_\_'s age, what did YOU KNOW about sex? How did you LEARN about sex?
21. Has your son/daughter attended a sex education program outside of school (e.g., thru church, community center, Planned Parenthood, etc)? Why or why not?
22. Have you ever asked OTHERS to talk with \_\_\_ about sex? Ever sought advice from BOOKS or MAGAZINES?
23. Do you think it is acceptable for a teenager to EXPERIMENT sexually? If yes, when is it acceptable and why? If no, why is it unacceptable?
24. To your knowledge, has \_\_\_ EXPERIMENTED sexually? If yes, how did you find out? How did/do you feel about that? (PROBE: any concerns? differences for girls and boys?)
  - a. Would you want to know if \_\_\_ was sexually active?
25. If \_\_\_ was in a SERIOUS REL'SHIP with someone and wanted that person to SPEND THE NIGHT in his/her room, would you allow that? (If no, is there a time when you could imagine allowing this in the future? Under what conditions?)
26. Do you think that the issues \_\_\_ is dealing with now around dating and sexuality are similar to or different from those you dealt with when you were his/her age?

**FINAL Qs** – last few questions are more generally about raising teens and the future.

27. A lot of people say that raising teens is challenging. Do you agree? Why or why not? What would you say has been the most challenging thing you have encountered raising a teenager?
28. Would you say that your **own experiences as a teenager** affect how you raise your teen(s)?
29. What kind of support does your community (or society) give you to parent your child/ren?

30. What is the most challenging thing you face in your own life? (e.g., work-related, health-related, family-related, etc.)
31. When do you think \_\_\_ will be ready to move out of the house?
32. At what age will you consider \_\_\_ an adult?
33. Do you have any expectations or things that you hope for \_\_\_'s future?
34. Is there anything you'd like to add?

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April 5, 2006

Dear Parent,

Hello. I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas, Austin in the Department of Sociology. For my dissertation project, I am studying parents' experiences raising teenagers.

I am writing to invite you, as a parent or guardian of a teenager, to participate in this study. I would like to interview you about your experiences raising a teenager. In particular, I would like to hear your views of the best ways (and perhaps the worst ways) to discuss puberty, dating, and sex with teenagers. The interview will take approximately half an hour, and can be scheduled at a time and a location that is convenient for you.

I hope you will consider participating in this study. Your participation is entirely voluntary, though, and your refusal will not affect your or your child's relationship to the University of Texas, Austin or the Austin Independent School District.

Please indicate whether you would like to participate in this project or not on the enclosed participation form. You may use the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope to return the participation form to my office or you may contact me at the phone number or email address listed below. I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Sinikka Elliott

Email: [selliott@soc.utexas.edu](mailto:selliott@soc.utexas.edu)  
Phone: XX

**PARTICIPATION FORM**

PROJECT TITLE: GUIDING ADOLESCENCE: TALKING TO TEENS  
ABOUT PUBERTY, DATING, AND SEX

PLEASE CHECK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

\_\_\_\_\_ **YES**, I WOULD LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE  
PROJECT. I UNDERSTAND THAT MY PARTICIPATION WILL INVOLVE  
A ONE-TIME, HALF-HOUR INTERVIEW (PLEASE FILL OUT THE  
CONTACT INFORMATION BELOW)

\_\_\_\_\_ **NO**, I WOULD NOT LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE  
PROJECT AT THIS TIME

\_\_\_\_\_ **MAYBE**, I MAY BE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN  
THE PROJECT, PLEASE CONTACT ME TO PROVIDE ME WITH MORE  
INFORMATION (PLEASE FILL OUT THE CONTACT INFORMATION  
BELOW)

.....  
**CONTACT INFORMATION**

MY NAME IS: \_\_\_\_\_

MY PHONE NUMBER IS: \_\_\_\_\_

MY EMAIL ADDRESS IS: \_\_\_\_\_

MY MAILING ADDRESS IS: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to: XX  
Or call **XX**



Code: \_\_\_\_\_

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What is your sex? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your race or ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. If you said that your race/ethnicity is **Hispanic** or **Latino**, what is your Hispanic background (e.g., Mexican-American, Puerto Rican)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. If you said that your race/ethnicity is **Asian**, what is your Asian background (e.g., Chinese-American)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Were you born in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. If no, where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Were your parents born in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. If no, where were your parents born? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (please check one of the following):  
\_\_\_\_\_ less than a high school degree,  
\_\_\_\_\_ graduated from high school (or got a GED),  
\_\_\_\_\_ attended some college,  
\_\_\_\_\_ graduated from college,  
\_\_\_\_\_ got a post-college degree (e.g., law degree, Ph.D.)
  - a. What is the highest level of education your **mother** completed? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. What is the highest level of education your **father** completed? \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE TURN OVER TO COMPLETE OTHER SIDE

7. **What is your employment status?** (please circle one):
1. part-time                      2. full-time                      3. homemaker                      4. retired
5. unemployed                      6. other: \_\_\_\_\_
8. **What is your occupation?** \_\_\_\_\_
9. **What is your own yearly income?** \_\_\_\_\_
10. **What is your total household income, including all earners in your household?**  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. **What is your current relationship status?** (please circle one):
1. single                      2. separated                      3. divorced                      4. widowed
5. married/living with partner
6. other: \_\_\_\_\_
- a. **If married/living with partner**, how long have you been together? \_\_\_\_\_
- b. **If divorced**, how long have you been divorced? \_\_\_\_\_
12. **How many children do you have?** \_\_\_\_\_
- a. What is/are the **age and sex** of your child(ren): \_\_\_\_\_
13. **What is your religious affiliation?** If none, please indicate this.  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. **Thinking for a moment about your political views, do you consider yourself to be ...?**  
Please circle one of the following:
1. very conservative                      2. somewhat conservative                      3. moderate
4. somewhat liberal                      5. very liberal                      6. libertarian
7. do not know or not political

THANK YOU

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## VITA

Sinikka Gay Elliott was born in New York City on April 22, 1970, the daughter of Dinah Elliott and Robert Elliott. After completing her work at Queen Elizabeth High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 1988, she entered The University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia to complete a one-year program, called the Foundation Year Program. Subsequently, she entered Dalhousie University, also in Halifax. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts, Honours from Dalhousie in May 1992. Upon graduating, she worked with a nonprofit organization to educate the community about domestic violence. She also founded and edited a newsletter and published numerous short articles. In August 2000, she entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin. She received her Master of Arts degree in 2002. Recent publications include "The performance of desire: Gender and sexual negotiation in long-term marriages," in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, with Debra Umberson. "Commitment without marriage: Union formation among long-term gay and lesbian couples," *Journal of Family Issues*, with Corinne Reczek and Debra Umberson. "Marriage in young adulthood." Chapter 11 in *Young Adult Mental Health*, with Liu Hui and Debra Umberson.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.